

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MODERNIST AMERICAN POETRY AS A STUDY OF OBJECTS

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In “Modernist American Poetry as a Study of Objects,” I focus on a group of modernist American poets—Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and George Oppen—who demonstrate an interest in objects and their transformation into aesthetic things. To distinguish between “objects” and “things,” I use “thing theory,” which grew out of the work of Bill Brown and, to date, has not been adequately applied to lyric poetry. While the object represents an entity one encounters in the world, the thing contains diverse associations and meanings that exceed its material function. Among modernist poets, it is essential to study this point of transformation, from object into thing, to examine the “ideas in things” that get invested in this process.

Such a study proves necessary in light of the significant role we understand things to play in modernist literature and in the modern era, when subjects were beginning to negotiate selfhood through and against a world of material things. Further, “things” are

commonly recognized as a particular focus of modernist poets, thanks in part to Williams's famous dictate in *Paterson*, "no ideas but in things." Poets ranging from Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, in addition to those in my study, all present poems in which things serve as a rhetorical focus. While several critics have acknowledged this modernist fascination, no study has addressed how modernist poets use the thing to resolve personal and poetic preoccupations. By focusing, specifically, on the subject's relationship to the object, I explore how things reveal the poet's process of constituting a poetic self by shedding particular anxieties over poetic function and projecting a voice of authority.

By bringing poets as diverse as Frost and Oppen into critical conversations about modernism, this study broadens understanding of a uniquely American strain of modernist poetry. American modernists were deeply conscious of the cultural authority inherent in the poetic act, as they sought formal and vocal innovations that could grant the poet a linguistic means to resolve feelings of fragmentation and alienation in the creation of poetic things.

MODERNIST AMERICAN POETRY AS A STUDY OF OBJECTS

by

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## Introduction: Modernist American Poetry as a Study of Objects

The birches are mad with green points  
the wood's edge is burning with their green,  
burning, seething—No, no, no.  
The birches are opening their leaves one  
by one. Their delicate leaves unfold cold  
and separate, one by one. Slender tassels  
hang swaying from the delicate branch tips—  
Oh, I cannot say it. There is no word.  
Black is split at once into flowers. In  
Every bog and ditch, flares of  
small fire, white flowers!—Agh,  
the birches are mad, mad with their green.  
The world is gone, torn into shreds  
with this blessing. What have I left undone  
that I should have undertaken? (*CPI* 172-173)

From "Portrait of the Author," William Carlos Williams

The above poem is the only one from William Carlos Williams's nearly 50-year collection that he titles "Portrait of the Author." And yet, without this claim prompting readers to consider the author's personal connection to the material, the poem's opening could be read as another impersonal modernist meditation upon an object, with the speaker employing detailed descriptions to probe the birch's nature. What stands out in Williams's attempt, however, is his personification of the object, as well as his exploration of it through its transformation into an aesthetic "thing." The speaker laments the inadequacies of language, even as he must rely upon it to gain access to the object. As Williams describes the birch leaves unfolding, his characterization settles on a single personified quality: madness. And the repeated description of the trees as "mad, mad with their green," particularly following the vocal gesture of screaming, suggests some element of the speaker's experience reflected by the object. This green madness, signaling vitality as much as it does disturbance, represents a state of being both agitated

and alive; it becomes a “blessing” for its power to destroy prior perception and make the world disappear (“the world is gone, torn into shreds”).<sup>1</sup> “Madness”, then, propels an intense, searching gaze upon the object world as the speaker’s layered descriptions betray more about his own conception of poetic self than they do about the birches. Through the object, the speaker negotiates personal preoccupations and conditions.

I begin with Williams’s “Portrait of the Author” because it encapsulates the topic of this dissertation, the tensions between subjects and objects in modernist poetry. The poem illustrates a speaker distinctly apart from the object he gazes upon, but one who nonetheless identifies aspects of himself through it; a speaker attempting an impersonal object representation, but one who, in the process, reveals deeply personal aspects of his experience. It also presents a speaker who initially recognizes a whole object—the birch trees, characterized by some essential quality of madness—but one who gradually re-assesses his ability to know such “wholeness,” instead pursuing knowledge by cataloging the object’s parts. In these respects, this poem reveals a particularly “modern” relationship between subjects and objects and illustrates a story of modernism that has not yet been fully told.

This dissertation argues that the objects in modernist poetry stand to tell us more about the subjects enacting their aesthetic representation than those subjects’ grasp of fixed external things. As these poets present objects in ways that challenge conventional associations and meanings, they also take up issues of poetic mastery and authority. This modernist fascination with objects, and the effort to transform them in the poetic space,

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<sup>1</sup> As one of the final poems of *Sour Grapes* (1921), “Portrait of the Artist” also serves as an important precursor to the explosive opening prose of *Spring and All* (1923), in which Williams demands complete destruction of the material world so that, through the imagination, he can create the world anew. In my chapter on Williams, I focus on *Spring and All* as the collection in which he most explicitly demonstrates tensions in the subject’s representation of objects.

reflects a desire to assert authority over meaning and claim knowledge of the “thing”; yet, simultaneously, the thinking subject recognizes the limitations of knowing objects outside of the self. As the poet looks upon the object world, what looks back is the subject’s own reflection, even as the poet seeks empowered perception that will resolve and suppress anxieties, stabilize fluctuations, and foster poetic authority. The “thing,” in turn, preserves the preoccupation that results from this conflict—the poet’s desire to project meaning through the act of naming, as well as his or her recognition of the impossibility of this task. In the poems I explore, objects mark particular concerns with which the poet is grappling as he or she strives for poetic mastery. The specific preoccupations for each poet—whether over gender, technology, or creative labor itself—all relate to the poet’s larger consideration about his or her function in the modern moment. Interaction with the object world raises, first, questions about the subject’s identity and emotional state: the self as an entity in relation to other things. Yet, further questions arise when the poet attempts to describe this relationship through language. In a moment when the certainty of language is being called into question, these poets turn to language to transform objects into things. What results is a group of poems that record a subject-object interaction marked by the poet’s concerns over attaining an authoritative voice through which to assert meaning through things.

Before I delve into further analysis of “Portrait of the Artist,” let me clarify a critical distinction I make between “objects” and “things.” In a poet’s aesthetic rendering of an object, the material frequently contains meanings beyond itself, and its actual or use value as “object” becomes distinct from its entity as “thing.” As Bill Brown explains in his acclaimed 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, in which he laid claim to the

burgeoning field of “thing theory,” the thing encapsulates ideas, associations, and meanings that exceed the object’s materiality:

You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.

Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else. (“Thing Theory” 5)

I employ Brown’s distinction between the object under examination and the aesthetic thing created in the poet’s formal treatment. So while the object may be a device structuring the poem rhetorically—as in several modernist poems where a speaker ruminates upon or impersonally describes an object—the object becomes a “thing” as the poet invests it with meanings beyond its material existence.

Studying the point of poetic transformation, in which the object becomes a thing, reveals something important about the dynamic between subjects and objects in modernist poetry, precisely because the thing encapsulates ideas in excess of the object, as Williams so famously claimed in his modernist dictate, “No ideas but in things.” I use “ideas” in this dissertation in the broadest sense to include all meanings exceeding the object’s use value, including feelings and emotions, as well as intellectual considerations.

W. J. T. Mitchell underscores the way that things become “simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague” (156):

The thing is invisible, blurry, or illegible to the subject. It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can look back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls “a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge.” (156-157)

Mitchell’s claim that the object proves “invisible, blurry, or illegible” speaks to the subject’s inability to know things outside of the self. The object’s capacity to appear, simultaneously, both familiar and strange—Freud’s very definition of the uncanny—puts an epistemological burden upon the poet: to find a process of gaining knowledge of the object. For the modernist poets in my study, this process becomes one of transforming objects into things, whereby things represent something more than objects, becoming markers of the subject-object encounter. As poetic creations, things also evidence the poet’s achievement of authority in the act of representation. I argue that this epistemological pursuit extends beyond the subject’s capacity to know external objects and, additionally, reflects preoccupations with how the subject comes to know itself, since identity formation is a process of identification with and differentiation from external objects. Although the thing may be, as Mitchell suggests, “invisible, blurry, or illegible to the subject,” it remains a thing through which these poets can pursue more concrete knowledge of abstract ideas. By using language to fix and contain the thing, they

attempt to resolve the overwhelming and—to again borrow Mitchell’s terminology—“nebulous,” “obdurate” and “vague” conditions characterizing anxiety in the modern moment.<sup>2</sup>

A study exploring the “thing” in modernist poetry may not seem particularly new, given critics’ frequent acknowledgement of the modernist attention to objects. In fact, a survey of objects recorded in poetry at this moment, from William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” and Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar,” to H.D.’s “Sea Rose” and Pound’s “An Object,” confirms this fascination. F.S. Flint’s call for “direct treatment of the ‘thing’” in his 1913 Imagist manifesto, Williams’s aforementioned claim in *Paterson* (1946) for “No ideas but in things”, and Stevens’ response in “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (1954) all suggest an interest in objects as “things” through which to explore modern experience.<sup>3</sup> Rejecting the abstraction and pursuit of absolutes through images that Symbolism offered, modernist poets turned to the concrete particular, the localized object. Imagism, for Flint and Pound, was a move toward visual purity in response to Romantic excesses and Victorian discursiveness; the “thing”

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<sup>2</sup> Although my argument is historically-grounded within a particular period of the early twentieth century, it is worth pointing out the way that certain terminology I employ—words such “anxiety,” “object” and “object-relations”—resonate within psychoanalytic theory. Although I am not undertaking a psychoanalytic reading of modernist poetics, psychoanalytic theory adds new dimensions of meaning to these concepts. For example, for Sigmund Freud, anxiety is an inescapable condition of psychic experience, an automatic response to traumatic stimuli at all stages of the subject’s development: the trauma of birth, separation anxiety with the loss of the mother/object, and castration anxiety in the Oedipal phase. Yet, as Lisa Hinrichsen notes, “Anxiety, by definition, is nebulous: an affect more sensed than sensible, indefinite in its origins and ends, psychically and spatially dislocated, and linguistically difficult to describe” (44). In Freud’s theories, “object-finding” becomes a means for the child to overcome the loss of the mother’s breast. He writes, “It is not without good reason that the suckling of the child at the mother’s breast has become a model for every love relation. Object finding is really a re-finding” (582).

<sup>3</sup> Williams first announced this claim in his 1923 lyric “Paterson,” although it later becomes prominent in the first book of his epic *Paterson*. I include Stevens’s 1954 poem—the final piece in his *Collected Poems*—as a means of bracketing this modernist attention to things. Stevens’s interpretation marks the final word on things from a high modernist figure. When George Oppen returns with his 1962 *The Materials*, he approaches the notion of “things” from a more post-modern perspective, which I gesture toward in my conclusion.

allowed the poet to establish emotional distance between the subjective ego and the external world on which it meditates. Yet, questions persist over the subject's distance from the object and whether the poet gained knowledge and authority by impersonally representing the thing (particularly given the move, by poets such as Williams, to universalize the particular). Thus, it is important to consider how the modernist relationship between subjects and objects sheds light on an aspect of modernism that has been less critically explored: the way that "things" reveal the poet's process of constituting subjectivity, of shedding preoccupations and projecting authority; in this task, these poets envision a particular conception of the poet figure in the twentieth century as an essential cultural voice promoting wisdom, knowledge, universality, and truth. While several critics have acknowledged a modernist attention to things,<sup>4</sup> no study to date has addressed how modernist poets use the thing to explore the poet's experience and, in the process, chart a new direction in American poetry. This study therefore challenges traditional conceptions of modernist poetry that deem the movement's main goal as "impersonality" or "objectivity," as I demonstrate that these poets return again and again to deeply personal concerns, even as they present seemingly impersonal objects. I explore this pattern in the poetics of four American modernists—Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, George Oppen, and Marianne Moore—whose use of objects reveal particular concerns about the poet's role in crafting the thing. In locating a

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<sup>4</sup> Several studies have examined the role of modernist objects in relation to still life and avant-garde aesthetics and explore mediums in addition to poetry. The most prominent of these works include Ellen Johnson's *Modern Art and the Object: A Century of Changing Attitudes* (1976) and John Erickson's *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (1995). J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1969) also marked a shift in scholarship looking at the material world of modernist poetry. More recently, Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998), Daniel Tiffany's *Toy Medium: Materialism and the Modern Lyric* (2000), and Charles Altieri's *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (2006) have continued this exploration.

common impulse among such a diverse group of American poets, this study broadens critical understanding of both modernism and the uniquely “American” lineage these poets were writing out of.

The poem that initiated this introduction, Williams’s “Portrait of the Author,” provides just one example of how the speaker’s encounter with the object betrays a sense of “terror” about the poet’s authority to know and represent objects, as well as his own condition of isolation in relation to other things. When the speaker laments, “What have I left undone/ that I should have undertaken?”, he asks to what extent he, designated as the “author,” should “undertake” the object, or assume the role of transforming it into something new. The first stanza of the poem presents the poet’s own struggles to find an appropriate representation. After his first description of “the wood’s edge” as “burning with their green,/ burning, seething,” the speaker interrupts with his dissatisfaction, “No, no, no.” His second attempt ends with “Oh, I cannot say it,” before he settles on the condition of madness. Frustration over the creative act and the poet’s inability to capture the object underlies the very madness that he characterizes as inherent within the thing.

The speaker presents this experience as one that leaves him isolated and lonely, seeking connection with others. He directs his comments to a “brother”: “We are alone in this terror, alone,/ face to face on this road, you and I,/ wrapped by this flame!” (*CPI* 172). Underlying the urgency and desperation is a desire to know and be known, to find a connection with humanity that will promote recognition and understanding: “Take me in your arms, tell me the commonest/ thing that is in your mind to say,/ say anything. I will understand you--!” (173). And yet, what follows this plea is another observation about the trees: “It is the madness of the birch leaves opening/ cold, one by one.” The speaker

endures the condition of madness—which the poem suggests is propelled by his frustrations over representation—lacking connection with surrounding people or things; he responds by projecting this experience onto the trees.

Despite the speaker's self-reflective characterization of the birches, the poem chronicles his pursuit of a more detached means of relating to objects, wherein the object can provide a controlled space in which to resolve these personal conditions; it also grants the opportunity to gain authority over language in the thing's construction. The speaker's shifting object descriptions throughout the poem reflect this desire for emotional release and a corresponding "cold" perspective on the world. Initially the descriptions contain clear signals of the speaker's emotional discord, from the emphasis on the birches' madness to the statement that "familiar objects" have been "changed and dwarfed." The speaker explains, "My rooms will receive me. But my rooms/ are no longer sweet spaces where comfort/ is ready to wait on me with its crumbs./ A darkness has brushed them" (173). These observations reveal less about the precise materials in these rooms that have undergone change and more about the subject's condition, where "darkened" things correspond to the speaker's conflicted self:

I am shaken, broken against a might  
that splits comfort, blows apart  
my careful partitions, crushes my house  
and leaves me—with shrinking heart  
and startled, empty eyes—peering out  
into a cold world.

The subject is fragmented and torn, aware of his separation from other things. He is left isolated with only perception to forge new connections or understanding. His shift toward greater emotional control in the final lines makes this goal more transparent: "And coldly the birch leaves are opening one by one./ Coldly I observe them and wait for the end./

And it ends.” The subject pursues a “cold” perspective—one that releases him from his own tumultuous emotion. In this process, the object becomes a deliberate vessel through which the poet can distill chaotic experiences into finite forms.

Despite this tonal change, the final lines fail to resolve the personal conditions the speaker’s descriptions have thus far revealed. He cannot observe the world coldly and can achieve distance only by projecting his madness outward. By the poem’s end, the speaker lets go of the object world altogether, instructing, “Drink and lie forgetting the world.” The poet shifts into detached objectivity in an attempt to reclaim emotional control and authority as he waits for the end. Thus, the poem depicts the very process by which this speaker has used the object to stabilize personal turmoil. Becoming lost in the object—“I am drowned in you”—grants the opportunity to subsume chaotic conditions within the thing. Yet, the poem proves particularly significant for opening this dissertation because, even in the pursuit of a “cold” perspective, Williams cannot overcome the “terror” of representation that, by the poem’s end, still drives the speaker “mad.” Preoccupations with poetic function and authority consume the poet and mark his representation of the thing.

### **Modernist and Contemporary “Thing Theory” in Conversation**

This dissertation builds upon the work of Bill Brown and the developing discourse of “thing theory” that has begun to ask important questions about the way objects “mediate relations between subjects . . . and . . . subjects mediate the relation between objects” (*SOT* 18). Traditional scholarly approaches to cultural materialism have focused on the consumption and exchange of objects in a commodity culture, examining consumer practices to determine how particular social structures ascribe value to objects.

In this model, the self becomes a subject acting upon and through specific material needs.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Brown argues, the cultural materialist approach denies both subjects and objects an identity outside of production and exchange. Instead, he emphasizes the need to look beyond this limited reading of objects, suggesting that “our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism” (6). When Brown re-examines existing critical works, he finds new implications of the questions they pose: “These are texts that, as I understand them, ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4). Things carry meaning far exceeding their value as commodities. In fact, things become markers of particular human relationships with the object world, just as they offer a medium for exploring and expressing pent-up feelings. When Brown asks, “How are things and thingness used to think about the self?”, he explicitly invites us to ponder the relationship between self and thing.

For all the value of Brown’s work in providing a theoretical foundation to my own, his most significant contribution to thing theory, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), does not focus on modernism and does not address the role of modern poetry in relation to his ideas (although Brown does turn to Williams’s oft-cited dictate to illustrate the difficulties of pinning down the precise “ideas” invested in “things”). Instead, he examines American novels from the 1890s to provide “a

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<sup>5</sup> Brown refers to works such as *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (1993), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (1996), and *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (1998). In addition, Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* examines modernism’s “extraordinarily generative fascination with the object understood as neither commodity (Goods) nor as symbol (Gods), but as ‘object,’ where any or all of the resonances of this complexly polysemous word might apply” (4). Mao’s study traces a complicated relationship of attraction and repulsion to objects as commodities, and thus to commodity culture itself. In contrast, my study explores the subject-object relationship beyond this cultural materialist reading.

prehistory of the modernist fascination with things” (14). In this sense, my study picks up where Brown’s work leaves off, with the purpose of focusing attention on an understudied genre of thing theory: lyric poetry.<sup>6</sup> Lyric poetry, by definition, is the genre in which the subject speaks from a particular moment in time, reflecting on his or her experience in the world in order to better understand it. And, as the modern subject faces increasing anxieties over the conditions of selfhood, the lyric mode provides an optimal means to work through resulting questions and complications. As we see in the work of numerous modern poets—including Eliot, Pound, Stevens, H.D., Amy Lowell, and those featured in this study, Frost, Moore, Williams, and Oppen—interaction with the object becomes a prominent device for structuring self-exploration. As these poets consider objects, the transformed “thing” reflects the concerns of a self expressing, and often negotiating, particular preoccupations, which prove individual for each poet.

Critics espousing the value of thing theory acknowledge the long-overdo attention to things as a device for understanding human experience. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham points out, “To call something a thing is not to describe it, but to position it in a sequence of emergent understanding. What we call things have emerged into the conceptual field as a problem, a challenge to our vocabulary: their identity has not been determined, but ignoring them is no longer an option” (135). To live fully with and among things requires us to reflect upon how they come to mean, as well as how they give meaning to our subjective experience. Harpham’s idea of the thing here speaks to the object’s resistance

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Harrow emphasizes this very lack of attention to modernist poetry in her recent work, *The Material, The Real, and the Fractured Self: Subjectivity and Representation From Rimbaud to Réda* (2004), in which she examines French modernist poets who manifest “a problematic (and problematizing) exploration of subjectivity with a resolute commitment to outwardness” (4). Harrow focuses on the body as the point of intersection with materiality, arguing that “the body—and by extension, embodied consciousness— . . . is inextricable from our sense of self and of other, and our corporeal awareness is crucial to our understanding of what it is to inhabit modernity” (218). The poets in her study, she concludes, look at things in order to subvert ideologies and perform cultural critiques.

and autonomy; thus, the thing's construction allows the poet to overcome certain epistemological challenges by gaining knowledge, possession, and authority over objects. Through things, Harpham claims, "the mind can discover in the world tokens of its own subjectivity, points of purchase for its energy, a principle of receptivity or responsiveness in the domain of the nonsubjective and nonsentient" (136). He calls the thing "an externalized version of identity, absorbing vague longings, momentary reflections, and fugitive impulses, and giving them back in enriched and articulated forms, giving body to fleeting cognitive or affective events that might never reach consciousness otherwise." This final notion sounds a great deal like Williams's directive to locate ideas in things, whereby ideas and feeling states must be made tangible in accessible external form. Yet, as Harpham points out, "much depends, of course, on the thing. And the very best things are products of human agency." For the poets of my study, things prove even more useful for accessing the subject because they are the products of poetic agency; things remain the poet's creation and exist only in the work of art. For example, Williams's "rose" may be inspired by his interaction with an actual rose<sup>7</sup>, but his representation of the object reflects a process of asserting human agency, of transforming that object into an artistic thing. My reading explores the parts of the poet's experience, the "fleeting cognitive or affective events," that get invested in the creation of things.

What Harpham critiques in Brown's "thing theory" is his resistance to define that theory too concretely or to draw clear conclusions about the ethical laws that get embodied in things. He states, "If—Brown nearly says—we could devise a proper theory of the ways we make and remake ourselves by infusing objects with subjective energy,

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, Williams claimed his inspiration came from seeing a black-and-white reproduction of Juan Gris's painting *Flowers* (1914). In this sense, Williams's process of representation responds to another artist's attempt at representation; the thing is removed, by several layers, from its corresponding object.

then we would be in a better position to understand the whole human field of human responsibility and cognitive agency” (143). Yet, Harpham concludes, Brown fails to articulate how this process takes place and its implications for human behavior. In turn, Harpham identifies a lack in Brown’s attention to the ethical function of things. Finding that “the thing in Brown’s sense has much in common with ethical law,” Harpham suggests, “Brown and others might well wish to pursue this possibility further” (144). Other critics, including Douglas Mao and Lori Merish, question Brown’s claims precisely on this point of whether they imply sweeping generalizations about human behavior, agency, and ethics. While Merish urges Brown to acknowledge social difference and to take culturally-specific aspects of identity into account in considering subject-object relations, Mao voices similar reservations:

The point itself—that there are all kinds of relations between humans and things not subsumable under concepts like commodity fetishism—is as persuasive as it is important. But . . . Brown tends to drift from this defensible claim to a less sturdy implication: that the residue left after we exhaust commerce-centered analysis is in some literal sense one residue, a transculturally and transhistorically persisting fascination. Writing confidently of a pedestrian fetishism we all experience, Brown gently diverts us from questions about whether people in the premodern West felt this same attraction to objects, whether people in nonwestern cultures share it always, and whether its form under modernity is to be traced not to a primal yearning but to an array of historical determinants (in addition to commodification per se). (219)

I would like to use these aspects of critique to put Brown's notion of "thing theory" in conversation with more historically-specific notions of the "thing" articulated by modernist poets. My argument, while applying thing theory's methodology of examining subject-object relations, is nevertheless grounded in the moment of modernity. Although the poet's exploration through objects has not been limited to 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernists, I argue that a relationship so prominently defined by the poet's preoccupation with his own function at a moment of isolation and fracture is unique to modernist poetry. Harpham's critique propels us to consider the larger implications of these poets' uses of things, which prove integral to their effort to forge an American poetics grounded in the local, but which can nonetheless promote more universal, and communal, experiences. The thing, then, proves a vessel serving a broader function.

For the Romantic poets, the predecessors whom modernists such as Eliot and Pound most explicitly positioned themselves against, the contemplation of objects served to structure self-exploration in spiritual terms. Objects fostered the poet's reconnection to a spiritual energy—what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the "Over-Soul"—latent within all things. As Emerson explains,

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal,

the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

(“Over-Soul” 262)

Emerson’s notion of the “Over-Soul” represents a master illusion of wholeness, a felt sense of unity to which the romantic subject strives to experience. One need only think of Walt Whitman’s excessive cataloging of objects, his lists of the minutia he encounters in his environment, as the manifestation of Emerson’s principles: the self that finds no barrier—gender, race, time, history, or even mortality—that can thwart its communion with external things. Finally, for the Romantics, the poet plays an essential role in promoting this type of connection to the physical world. Poets, what Emerson calls “liberating gods” (“The Poet” 335), can emancipate humanity from enchained patterns of thinking. “On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying,” Emerson states; instead, “we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode or in an action or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought” (336). The poet performs an essential role in transforming the culture: “And this is the [poet’s] reward; that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome to thy invulnerable essence” (340). The poet shall see and testify in order to transform the perception of his readers.

The modernist poets in this study extend certain ideas of their Romantic predecessors, in particular their vision of the poet as an authoritative cultural voice offering insight into things. Nevertheless, in their approach to objects, we can also identify distinctions. For example, modernist poets do not pursue communion and convergence with the object to promote transcendent harmony. The world itself is not whole but, rather, fractured, and the subject remains distinctly separate from its

surroundings. As we might glean from the title of Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1934), the world proves a series of discrete and disjointed parts. This position of separateness and distinction proves a barrier that itself engenders newfound anxiety. In an historical moment distinguished by the death of God and the destruction of humanist meta-narratives that helped stabilize the subject's place in the world, the Romantic subject's aspiration for coherence becomes replaced by the modern subject's overwhelming awareness of its fragmentation. Creating the thing provides an opportunity to stabilize the subject amidst these conditions, because the poet can explore the very objects marking (and, in some cases, causing) the subject's isolation.

In addition, although these modernists claim the poet's authority to renew perception of the object world, they recognize this effort as a challenging—and not automatic—pursuit. Poets such as Williams and Frost were outspoken in their views about the poet's important cultural role—what Williams promotes in his calls to inspire contact with the physical world such that the imagination can render the world anew.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, these modernists were not simply reiterating neo-Romantic aspirations. Their perception of their role as poets was rendered more complicated by the poet's destabilized sense of authority. Representing things to provide a new kind of access to the object proves a difficult task, a preoccupation that accounts for the variety of technical experimentation we find in modernist poetry.

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of Robert Frost, Paul Giles argues that Frost cultivated an “oracle effect”—a theory adopted from Pierre Bourdieu—whereby “the representative figure succeeds in translating himself from history into mythology, thereby seeming to rise above the contingent divisions of material circumstances by presenting himself as ‘a transcendent moral person’ (732). In order for Frost to attain this effect, Giles finds that he engages in a “splitting of personality” such that “a more impersonal manipulation of fragmented perspectives becomes a necessary part of the enterprise.” Frost seeks a national voice that can speak to, and on behalf, of an eager audience; yet, to attain this voice of authority he must separate it from other more anxious and uncertain voices that mark his own condition. The process of projecting authority is one then of gaining control over the fragmented aspects of the poet's self.

The subject's fractured condition remains a concern for the poets of my study, as well as for modernist writers more broadly. According to Dennis Brown, selfhood and the limitations of its representation are central problems in modernist texts, which "radically probed the nature of selfhood and problematised the means whereby 'self' could be expressed" (1). He finds modernist selfhood to be "characteristically deconstructive" (1), while it nonetheless "presupposes some kind of pre-existent unity which is in the process of being broken down" (2). The fragmented subject laments its loss of wholeness, even as it considers whether and how to represent the conditions of its destruction. The experience provokes anxiety because the modern subject still believes in some previous state of wholeness that should be reconstituted. Murray Roston also finds modernity marked by a "crisis in identity" that results in real and overwhelming anxieties of selfhood. He cites several historical factors, including the mass destruction of World War I, the large-scale socio-economic upheaval associated with urbanization, the rise of religious skepticism, and the shifting beliefs in evolution prompted by advances in rational science. To this list, we can add changing forms of labor and (often-related) transformations in gender roles, as well as new relationships to the environment in the shift between rural and urban ways of life. Such historical transformations contribute to the subject's instability as it engages a changing modern world. It is in this context, amidst conditions that induce particular concerns, that we must consider modernist poets' engagement with objects. It is from a place of self-fragmentation and otherness that poets are drawn to create something whole within the "thing."

The early twentieth century is also a moment in which subjects are beginning to understand themselves through and against a world of material objects. Following late-

nineteenth-century advances in technology and industry, as well as the advent of a consumer culture, particular subjects, such as the modern figure of the “new woman” or the “New Negro,” are beginning to form entirely new modes of identity through interaction with material culture. Just as twentieth-century subjects face increasing anxiety over their own fragmentation, they encounter a world of commodities that seem whole and stable. This illusion of the commodity’s wholeness masks the complex relations of production lurking within it, as Marx reminds us through his fetish nature the commodity. Nevertheless, the commodity provides another master illusion of wholeness to which the modern subject can aspire. Wholeness remains a particular fascination for the poets of my study—both in the creation of the thing (rendered whole in the poem’s construction) and the thing’s resulting relation to a stabilized speaking subject.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Gertrude Stein claims that wholeness was a central concern of modernism, arguing that “the United States began a different phase when, after the Civil War, . . . they created the Twentieth Century” by “assembling the whole thing out of its parts, the whole thing which made the Twentieth Century productive” (152). Stein classifies her own experimentations with punctuation and grammar as an effort to linguistically represent this idea of the whole. More broadly, for the poets of this study, exploring objects becomes one way to represent the “whole things” that make modernity productive while, simultaneously, evidencing the poet’s own authority in his or her productivity. By negotiating anxieties in this way, the subject stands to reclaim a sense of wholeness, a “supreme fiction,” as Wallace Stevens might say, where fragmentation can be stabilized

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<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to imply here that modernist poets necessarily represent things as whole entities; in fact, certain techniques employed by several poets of my study, including Williams and Oppen, promote the object’s fragmentation and distortion. My argument is merely that even these techniques aim at universalizing objects in a way that grants greater understanding of them.

and disconnected parts restored. Although wholeness remains a fiction—thus making fantasy and imagination such prominent concepts to consider—it proves a necessary one for modernist poets seeking to resolve anxieties of fragmentation. As Eliot states toward the close of *The Waste Land*, “These fragments I have shored against my ruin.”

Driving interaction with the thing, then, are questions about the subject’s own condition—more specifically, how perception of the thing helps the subject come to know and stabilize the self. In the poets of my study, this consideration of self is most often played out around the concept of a poetic self. How can the poet project a voice of authority in his or her representations of whole things? Pound acknowledges the difficulty of fixing a self in *Gaudier-Brzeska*: “In the ‘search for oneself,’ in the search for ‘sincere self-expression,’ one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says, ‘I am’ this, that, or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing” (85). Here, Pound describes the very fragmentation I have been discussing, a modern sense of the self’s impermanence, fluctuation, and fracture; it is a self that one “searches” for and yet cannot cohere. He also describes a poetic process in which the act of “groping” for language reflects an experience of locating the poet’s self amidst shifting, and temporary, conditions. Just as Williams demonstrates in “Portrait,” language proves an imprecise device, for it can never firmly fix the thing or the self. Yet, language remains the tool available as modern poets pursue coherence—even if its achievement exists only in its representation on the page.

Although the self’s relationship to the thing proves difficult to translate linguistically, it is this relationship that Pound’s image strives to convey: “In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective

transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (89). Pound’s promotion of Imagism as “direct treatment” of the subject or object was a form of descriptive purity in response to Romantic excesses and Victorian discursiveness. Yet, Imagism was always more than objective visual description. The image reflects the subject’s internalized response to the object, a response that conveys a great deal about the subject’s condition. Underlying his interaction with the image—Pound’s vessel for transforming the object into a thing—is self-expression that can explore the subject’s experience.

In addition, T.S. Eliot, who along with Pound is most strongly associated with an “impersonal” modernism, reveals a poetic practice that uses things to aestheticize the self’s condition.<sup>10</sup> In his 1919 essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” Eliot designates the “objective correlative” as an object-use that preserves personal emotion, albeit transformed into accessible, universal, and impersonal form:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (101)

Here, the idea within the thing *is* the emotional state of the speaker, even as Eliot moves to represent these conditions through impersonal materials. The goal is to universalize the

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin also offers a notion of the modern object as a container for selfhood. He celebrates the books in his library outside of their function or status as texts—in fact, he admits he has not read many of them—but rather as vessels for a deeply personal history. Each object becomes an artifact solidifying his sense of self, despite conditions of transition, disruption, and exile. Benjamin describes, “—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them” (67). In the case of Benjamin’s collection, the possession is literal; however, the modernist poets of my study also demonstrate a form of ownership through their artistic representations, their rendering of objects into things, whereby possession becomes the means to assert meaning; this idea is exemplified most clearly in my chapter on Marianne Moore. In both cases, the concept that “lives” within the object (as thing) is the self, for the thing exists only through the subject’s relation to it.

poem's emotion by shifting it away from the author's personality and individual experience, and employing a more objective means of prompting the intended emotion within the reader. This suggests a very different claim for objects than that proposed by the New Critics—who nonetheless use Eliot as their theoretician—for whom objects serve a particular function within the modernist poem: to maintain ironic distance between the subject matter and the poet.

Eliot's definition of the objective correlative proves a somewhat mechanical application of objects and experiences that masks the complexity of locating an object to encapsulate a speaker's emotion. The objective correlative—or the made “thing”—grants the reader access to “ideas” within it, in this case, the speaker's emotions. As Eliot constructs it, the objective correlative remains a tool of representation, addressing how the poet can communicate meaning to the reader. This model assumes an authoritative poet-speaker who engages in a somewhat automatic process wherein both the selection of the objective correlative and the communication of its meaning proves a straightforward process. Yet, the poets of my study recognize a more complicated process of interaction. As we saw in the experience Williams depicts in “Portrait of the Author,” the task of locating an adequate objective correlative can terrorize the poet. Negotiating the subject's response to an object—and translating a temporal experience, via language, into some lasting form—is never straightforward. Thus, the process of representation, of locating and, ultimately, asserting meaning through the thing, becomes an important process to study.

Applying Bill Brown's “thing theory” to the poetic statements of Eliot and Pound helps validate an approach that studies these poetic devices—the objects, whether as

impersonal images, objective correlatives, or other forms—as points through which to access the subject’s anxieties, pleasures, intellectual responses, fears, and emotions: those feeling states that modernist poets are often reluctant to explicitly claim. And while I resist drawing universal conclusions about the way subjects define themselves through and against objects, I do find a common pattern in this group of modernist poets, despite the variety of relations that each forges with particular objects. The poets of my study frequently engage with objects in a manner that mediates personal preoccupations, often with poetic function, so the poet can project more stable authority. It is important to point out that Pound, Eliot, and Williams are not, in their own theoretical statements about images, objective correlatives, and things, respectively, articulating the same concept as Bill Brown’s object/thing distinction. Nevertheless, all three poets distinguish between the artistic representation of materiality and actual materiality; further, they all suggest that something other than the object itself—something pertaining to the subject’s personal experience—must be represented in the thing and yet done so in a way that still promotes the thing’s universalizing potential. They all wrestle with the best technical means to promote meaning in things that can speak to, and beyond, the individual poet’s experience. In this sense, these modernist poets present concepts consistent with those found in contemporary “thing theory” and that are, therefore, worth exploring through Brown’s terminology.

### **Ideas in Things**

In this dissertation, what proves significant is not only the act of contemplating objects—a rhetorical move dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Exeter riddles—but the diverse ways in which the poets I examine, Frost, Moore, Williams, and Oppen, provide

access to the ideas residing within them. Since modernist poets find previous models of object meditation inadequate for the conditions of modernity, they must explore new techniques for interacting with objects. This accounts for the variety of technical experimentation that we find among practitioners of modernism. Yet, if Williams' ambiguous dictate—"No ideas but in things"—can be reduced to any single claim, it is that abstract ideas must be made concrete through material fact.<sup>11</sup> His claim also introduces the problematic concern of where these ideas are generated. Do they exist as some latent identity within the thing? Are they social or political ideas projected onto the object by culture, the poet, or even the reader? Can we separate one such harvested "idea" from another? Although I do not deny the presence of numerous and diverse ideas that get carried within objects, I am most interested in those ideas that get invested as the poet considers the task of representation; in this way, I unpack ideas that relate most specifically to the poet's conception of poetic function as a response to modernity.

For example, the speaker of Frost's "After Apple-Picking" does not pre-determine a condition of anxiety about his labor that he correspondingly projects onto the apples he has picked; instead, it is his very interaction with these apples—the speaker's lingering uncertainty about his role in their picking, his sense of exhaustion and failure, despite the brimming barrels—that produces his psychologically complex response. And, as I will

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<sup>11</sup> Coming on the heels of American pragmatism, a philosophical movement ushered in by William James's *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), these ideas prove consistent with pragmatism's attention to the concrete consequences of abstract thinking (in other words, greater attention to the "thing" than the "ideas" within it). James states, "The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (34). Observable facts—objects—become the vehicle through which one can assess truth, rather than through pre-existing belief systems or ideologies. I point this out to show the circulation and intersection of ideas about objects throughout this modernist period, although there is little evidence to suggest that Williams was invoking pragmatism directly. Of all the poets of my study, only Robert Frost was a documented follower of Jamesian philosophy, with Jay Parini confirming that Frost taught James's texts *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, and *Pragmatism* during his tenure at the Plymouth Normal School in 1911-1912 (106-110).

argue in Chapter One, it is through Frost's formal approach, most specifically his employment of metaphor, that he renders the apples more than the literal products of labor, but tangible markers reflecting the poet's preoccupations with his role in the creative process. These poets are not simply locating ideas they imagine to be lurking within the object, as though the object contains its own sealed meaning, and the poet's function is simply to access it.<sup>12</sup> Frost's apples do not carry some definitive, elusive meaning. Instead, his interaction with the apples raises to the surface the subject's attitudes regarding his poetic labor, with all of the thing's functions—as allusion, metaphor, symbol, and literal object—granting impersonal distance from what is an otherwise deeply personal encounter.

Breaking down the formal process of the transformation from object into thing allows us to study the ideas the poet invests in the thing. And while the rhetorical approaches differ as much as the particular concerns generated, the poets of my study reveal a pattern. They explore the “thing” as a response to destabilizing conditions, with each poet searching for a poetics that can reconnect the subject to more useful truths (the “supreme fictions” discussed above): Frost uses things to craft a poetics of wisdom; Moore presents artistic things through which she can promote connections across time and history; Williams claims a visionary imagination that can grant access to universal knowledge; and Oppen searches for “truth” or “actuality” of experience, in the process

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<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire describes this type of relationship of children to their toys where “toys become actors in the great drama of life, reduced in size by the *camera obscura* of their little brains” (198). He concludes that “the overriding desire of most children is to get at and *see the soul* of their toys” (202); in turn, the child's inability to access this soul—some abstract identity, or idea, granting the toy an interior life—introduces the child to the modern condition of melancholy and gloom. Baudelaire imagines a relationship to objects in which the child pursues ideas he or she can never attain. Lacan offers a similar concept of the inaccessible “Thing” that lurks at the center of the real. While the object is a tangible material thing, language attempts to name its interior “Thing”—ideas to reconnect the subject to a pre-lingual state. Nevertheless, as for Baudelaire, accessing the real proves an unattainable pursuit.

exposing ideologies within emerging mechanisms of modernity. Yet, just as the thing stabilizes the poetic subject, granting authority through poetic creation, it also reveals underlying concerns about the poet's ability to fulfill this function.

Voice, as one vehicle for creating the thing, exposes such preoccupations. As all of these poets pursue an authoritative means of effecting the object's transformation, iterations of voice—and the degree to which each poet can attain a voice of authority—become important to consider. For Frost, studying voice exposes concerns over gender and labor as the poet pursues masculine authority. For Moore, poetic authority proves a vocal performance achieved through impersonal, gender-neutral, and polyphonic description; the achievement of the thing comes only through a particular achievement of voice. In Williams's work, the poet employs a sparse, declarative voice to bring objects into being—and, in turn, elevate local experience to the universal; for Williams, the act of naming itself grants a certain authority that can reveal the thing's universalizing potential. Voice proves a useful device to analyze in *Spring and All* for the vocal contrasts between the book's poetry and prose. As Williams moves between the two media, we see the prose's more anxious, energetic iterations of voice muted into the verse's precise and controlled description. Finally, Oppen's fragmented voice reflects the experiences of a self destabilized by modern objects and the ambiguous ideological forces of modernity; his subject stands to regain authority specifically through the object's representation, but the vocal act is one of passive deconstruction rather than active assertion. In short, by exploring the way these poets utilize voice, we can unpack the complicated preoccupations carried in the thing to better understand each poet's conception of poetic authority.

Voice also proves significant in a study of American modernism, given the outspoken aims of poets such as Frost and Williams to pursue a poetics that could more authentically express American experience, in both its attention to American landscapes and its representation of an American idiom. The “voice” of a poem suggests a rhetorical register attuned to the diction and rhythms of American speech. Reading voice becomes a manifold approach, for the poems often reveal multiple voices, including the various poetic subjects speaking within the poem (a dramatic function most clearly demonstrated in Frost’s dialogue and monologue poems), the use of quotation (a technique we see most prominently in Moore’s work), and the voice of the poet, which, at times, stands apart from the speaker.

Voice is just one device I study in exploring the formal treatment of things. Formal techniques mediate the reader’s relationship to—and, in some cases, even recognition of—objects under examination; yet, formal practices alone do not lead to simple declarations of meaning. As Brown points out, “Asking what amounts to two rather simple questions—How are objects represented in this text? And how are they made to mean?—results in rather complex, partial, and provisional answers” (18). And while Brown resists offering a single answer, instead proclaiming that in his experiment “the answers, for predictable and not so predictable reasons” often “swerve off track,” I argue that modernist experimentations with form yield important insight into how objects are “made to mean.” Frequently, despite the poet’s desire to project some final meaning, the poem itself reinforces the impossibility of a single authority. Due to this complexity, wherein the poet strives for poetic authority even as he or she realizes its limitations, each poet’s formal treatment of the thing becomes central for exposing the means and

limitations of preserving ideas in things. As I have suggested above, this preoccupation with poetic function, in fact, drives modernist experimentation as each poet pursues new techniques for attaining meaning in things.

For example, Frost's use of metaphor reflects both an attempt to transform questions into wisdom, as well as his anxiety about this process. Although critics would not classify metaphor as a typically "modernist" technique, particularly in light of the Imagist dictate for "direct treatment of the thing," Frost's use carries modernist implications in the concerns it negotiates. Despite Frost's defense of metaphor as the primary force of poetry—as he famously claims in "Education by Poetry," "unless you are at home in the metaphor, ... you are not safe anywhere" (*CP* 106)—his speakers continually face the risks that accompany metaphor, where meaning is vulnerable to multiplicity and misinterpretation. Although metaphor provides release from complexities that the poem's "reality" cannot resolve, Frost's metaphors are themselves fraught with anxiety over poetic function, as his speakers continually recognize the limitations of metaphor for presenting truth.

In the case of Oppen, disruption of traditional syntax makes visible the way language has naturalized the subject's strange relations to modern objects; in turn, he directs readers to consider new relations to the materials with which the subject interacts. These technical experimentations also underscore the challenges of reaching some final "truth" within the thing. Instead, the fragmented syntax demonstrates a subject testing his own experience through what Oppen calls the "sequence of disclosure" ("Statement on Poetics" 26) as he negotiates feelings of passivity and powerlessness in the face of modern technological materials. Moore also complicates the notion of authority in her

extensive use of quotation; her very idea of authority as a polyphonic register of voice suggests that Moore sought to destabilize traditional ideas of power and poetic authority. Yet, her excessive revising points to an uncertainty about the qualities Moore wanted to project in her poetic voice. Finally, Williams's experiments with line and syntax, which tend to fragment the object by reading it in pieces, also reveal the poet's preoccupation with rendering a new creation. Williams advocates a mode of perception, via the imagination, that strips from the object pre-existing associations, or aspects of "thingness," in order to renew it. By presenting fragmented descriptions of the object's parts, Williams can carefully examine the subject's actual experience of encounter. It is through this very local contact that Williams aims to prompt universal access. Yet, tension exists over whether—and how—the poet can make the local object a universal thing, transferring within it some larger knowledge of human experience and understanding. Thus, for all the poets of my study, particular poetic techniques provide the means of projecting poetic authority, while simultaneously revealing preoccupations and anxieties in the subject's position.

In addition to questions of form and representation, I address the more fundamental question of which objects get represented, since the particular items attracting each poet's attention reflect something about the ideas dominating his or her concerns.<sup>13</sup> For example, Oppen frequently focuses on objects of technology and urban modernity—the elevator shaft, the car, a refrigerator—and in the process sheds light on particular anxieties that mark the modern subject's relationship with technology. Through formal techniques that defamiliarize objects, Oppen demonstrates the speaker's strange or

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<sup>13</sup> Even for Baudelaire, the child's choice of toy suggests a great deal about his or her aesthetic inclinations: "I believe that generally children dominate their toys; in other words that their choice is determined by dispositions and desires, vague, if you wish, and by no means formulated, but very real" (200).

“unreal” relations to modern materials. His interaction becomes an experience of displacement and alienation—a point made even more significant in his representation of a modern world in which the self has been submerged within technology, with the speaker, at times, speaking from inside of modern things.

Williams also gives attention to trivialized, everyday objects; yet, unlike Oppen, his objects are not typically markers of “modernity” as he often focuses on natural objects encountered in his landscape. This attention to particular and yet common or universally-encountered objects speaks to Williams’s self-perceived function as a poet promoting new ways of seeing. A modernist who dismissed the reverence to European tradition he saw in poets like Eliot and Pound, Williams actively promoted a native arts that could attest to multiple experiences of “contact” with the American landscape. In his praise of Juan Gris, on whose 1914 painting *Flowers* Williams’s well-known roses poem was based, Williams credits Gris with focusing on “Things with which he is familiar, simple things—at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination” (110). Williams advocates local experience as the optimal means for pursuing the universal, because through the local the subject can authentically examine the conditions of his contact—and in a manner that will be identifiable for readers. Nevertheless, his focus on the subject’s experience of the object rather than the object itself reflects certain questions about how and whether the poet can truly universalize local experience.

Frost also focuses on natural objects reflective of his regionalized New England landscape, most frequently exploring natural objects the speaker encounters—trees, flowers, blueberries, apples, brooks, or birds. In the poems, Frost transforms natural materials into artistic things. His objects become significant for their condition as tamed

and often-domesticated natural objects—things over which the poet has gained authority through the poetic process. For Frost the wild object poses the most threat (and is most often gendered female) as he seeks to regulate untamed aspects of self. In contrast, many of his objects, such as the birch trees of “Birches” and “Wild Grapes,” prove vulnerable to the ravages of untamed nature. The speaker gains mastery precisely when he gains poetic and formal control over things.

In contrast, Moore tends to avoid natural objects altogether, only addressing them when they have been transformed into man-made forms, or artistic representations. Her interest in the art object—as a thing that has been transformed from its real-world counterpart, and which she then transforms again in the poetic space—elucidates her concern with how subjects respond to created things. The particular objects that garner each poet’s attention induce for each a form of meditation resurrecting already-dominant anxieties about the poet’s role in creating things. The process of overcoming these concerns through some form of poetic control offers the opportunity to project greater stability as a figure effecting cultural power.

Finally, I am cautious of readings that suggest that modernist poets were after *no* idea in the thing,<sup>14</sup> that they pursued the thing as thing-unto-itself and demonstrated little

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Brown articulates the thinking around this point of view, even as he questions it by exposing the complexity of ideas in things. Asking, “How is it, then, that such a fantasy—of ideas in things—sustains one version of what we name American modernism?,” he concludes:

The answer, of course, is that this literalization of Williams’s creed violates his own poetic practice of rendering things—“a red wheel/ barrow”—in their opacity, not their transparency. “No ideas but in things” should be read as a slip of the pen: a claim—on behalf of replacing abstractions with physical facts—that unwittingly invests objects with interiority, whereas Williams meant to evacuate objects of their insides and to arrest their doubleness, their vertiginous capacity to be both things and signs (symbols, metonyms, or metaphors) of something else. On the one hand, that slip may be read as a mark of the limitation of language, for how else could one put the matter—“no ideas but in things”—so epigrammatically? On the other hand, it may be read as the mark of a limit within modernism’s effort to accept opacity, to satisfy itself with mere surfaces. (11-12)

interest in penetrating its surface to access meanings within. This reading suggests that the thing carries no symbolic value beyond the fact that an object exists beneath the poet's gaze. J. Hillis Miller articulates this view in *Poets of Reality* (1969), arguing that modern poetry "follows in its motion the flowing of time and reveals, through this mobility, the reality of things as they are" (11).<sup>15</sup> Such a reading may seem to be supported by Wallace Stevens in his late-modernist long poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a poem Miller also cites at the close of his introduction:

We keep coming back and coming back  
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

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

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

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. (*CP* 471)

Yet, Stevens acknowledges that working toward the "poem of pure reality" is not a natural or easy process. He recognizes that "The objects tingle and the spectator moves/ With the objects" (470), for "We fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form." He

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In fact, Brown finds that Williams himself promotes this idea of the thing emptied of its doubleness, even as he invites consideration of the thing's interiority.

<sup>15</sup> Of the relationship between subject and object in this model, Miller emphasizes distance and separation: "To walk barefoot into reality means abandoning the independence of the ego. Instead of making everything an object for the self, the mind must efface itself before reality, or plunge into the density of an exterior world . . . . The effacement of the ego before reality means abandoning the will to power over things . . . . Only through the abnegation of the will can objects begin to manifest themselves as they are, in the integrity of their presence" (7-8). Miller argues that his new division and detachment between the mind and things allows for a new kind of "copresence" (9). My argument opposes Miller on the nature of this relationship, although I also acknowledge a world in which the subject experiences detachment and isolation from other things. Many of these poets pursue some measure of detachment to gain authority over the thing. Nevertheless, these poets first forge a connection to the object even as they recognize detachment as necessary for its representation.

describes a series of objects from which the self cannot truly separate: “Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves/ . . . So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart/ The idea and the bearer-being of the idea // The point of vision and desire are the same” (466). Ruminating on the spectator in New Haven, the subject that seeks truth through things, he describes, “Our breath is like a desperate element/ That we must calm.” The anxious, “desperate” self must be stilled before it can achieve some pure perception of external objects. However, the poem continually questions whether the self can ever be stilled into quietude, particularly as it engages surrounding objects. Stevens captures a rather complicated process of accessing “reality,” where “The enigmatical/ Beauty of each beautiful enigma/ Becomes amassed in a total double-thing./ We do not know what is real and what is not” (472). The thing remains a “double-thing” because the spectator cannot easily distinguish its “reality” from the parts of his mind that have been projected on and through it.

Despite interpretations of this poem concluding that Stevens ultimately articulates a Romantic vision—wherein the poet “seeks/ God in the object itself, without much choice” (475)—such a reading oversimplifies the complex difficulties facing a modern spectator, for whom “The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:/ The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,/ The gay tournamonde as of a single world// In which he is and as and is are one” (476). Such a spectator cannot transcend the world around him; in fact, his “instinct” is to view the world in which he is a part. The goal then is a “final form,” a poetics that “directly and indirectly [gets] at” (488) the thing, as Stevens describes: “It is not the premise that reality/ Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses/ A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (489). Despite appearances, the object is not a solid

entity that remains fixed outside of the self; instead, it is an obscure reflected thing crossing over the world, a force that presses back upon that same partial, projected shadow. Stevens's concept of even "pure reality" involves a notion of reflection and projection. It is a "thing" that proves obscure, darkened, and inherently double: "It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight./ It is a visibility of thought,/ In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once" (488). Poetry promotes an interaction effect, wherein "hundreds of eyes," readers even well into the future, can gain access. The poet speaks from his own conditions but strives to universalize this experience to facilitate readers' own engagement with "pure reality."

This question of opacity undoubtedly challenges any definitive reading of modernist poetry. Brown finds that Williams's short, sparse verse of *Spring and All* (1923) often leads to "opacity" of ideas rather than "transparency" and an "evacuation" of ideas rather than access. For my study, then, the materiality of the poem's production becomes essential for accessing meaning. In the case of the red wheel barrow, or the other things of *Spring and All*, one cannot gain access to the particular meaning Williams invests in this "thing" without the context of the poem's surrounding prose—hyperbolic philosophical writings that depict a poet grappling with his function to reinvigorate perception of the world. I employ a combination of textual materialism, formalism, and biography to locate clues about the governing preoccupations with authorship that mediate each poet's relationship to the thing. My methodology looks at an accumulation of poems and formal approaches throughout full collections. For each of the poets of my study, I examine the early collection (or collections) in which the poet engages most

clearly in this contemplation of objects, undertaking a process of transforming objects into things.

In chapter one, ““But I Was Going to Say When Truth Broke In’: Robert Frost and the Self-Projected Thing,” I examine Frost’s second and third volumes, *North of Boston* (1914) and *Mountain Interval* (1916), tracing two particular anxieties of selfhood that get reflected through the objects in his landscape: anxieties over gender in what it means to regain a sense of control over one’s environment, and anxieties over labor in what it means to define a self through creative labor. At stake are specifically-gendered issues of poetic authority at a moment when Frost elevates the poet as an essential national figure. As Frost constructs things, he invests in them a particular version of identity that can stabilize him as a poet-figure of wisdom. In the process, he represses more anxious aspects of identity, particularly concerning masculinity and labor, which prove prominent for Frost and his speakers. Through things, Frost can negotiate two layers of anxiety: his speakers’ concerns over their own conditions, with objects frequently becoming the vehicles through which they can explore epiphanies or wisdom; and the poet’s larger preoccupation with the relationship between subjects and objects and the poet’s task to invest meaning in things.

In this chapter I focus on metaphor and voice as two prominent devices Frost uses to transform objects into things. Even as metaphor allows Frost to project agency and control amidst feelings of alienation and powerlessness, this poetic technique has its limitations, which voice proves central for exposing. I apply Richard Poirier’s claim about the dialectic relationship of metaphor and voice in Frost’s poetry, wherein voice frequently reflects the speaker’s hesitancy about the chosen metaphor and, more broadly,

about the speaker's own capacity to create meaning. Even as Frost claims authority in his act of creating the thing, he often underscores the speakers', and the poet's, challenge in asserting meaning. Nevertheless, the thing provides an opportunity for Frost and his speakers to project a particular version of authority.

In the second chapter, "Marianne Moore's *Observations* and Imaginary Possession of the Thing," I unpack the process by which Moore transforms objects into things, a process she classifies in the poem "When I Buy Pictures" as "imaginary possession." In her first collection, *Observations* (1924), Moore demonstrates a fascination with art objects: a fish transformed into a glass bottle; a seagull engraved in lapis lazuli; artifacts featured in museum displays; even natural objects, such as a chameleon or snail, portrayed as images embodying the polish and refinement of her poetics. By so prominently featuring constructed, and perfected, exteriors, Moore elevates the artist as a figure of cultural authority and demonstrates her interest in the responsive power of aesthetic things. I examine her process of imaginary possession through terms Moore employs in two well-known poems, "When I Buy Pictures" and "Poetry": "pleasure" and "contempt." Although these concepts are oppositional, Moore's poetic of things relies upon the poet's successful engagement with both experiences of the object. First, Moore strives to gain a sense of connection to the object through the experience of pleasure, which may include sensual, emotional, or even intellectual delight. Nevertheless, she also aims to achieve (and evoke in the reader) "perfect contempt," an experience that fosters disdain and critical judgment. This latter shift helps explain the speaker's retreat to a place of critical distance within the poem's rhetorical act, as well as Moore's use of techniques that distance readers from the material,

including her elevated, scientific and Latinate diction, unattributed quotations, vague pronouns, syllabic forms that denaturalize syntax, and frequent concluding lines and revisions that shift into abstraction. Moore's poetics thus illustrates a tension between closeness and distance, between pleasure and contempt, as the poet negotiates what it means to assert possession over the object and gain a voice of authority in its representation as a thing.

In chapter three, "'THE WORLD IS NEW': William Carlos Williams's Imagination and the Renewal of Things," I focus on *Spring and All* (1923) as the book in which Williams most clearly demonstrates a concentration on objects, with the intent of renewing materials through their creative transformation. Although Williams does not employ the same terminology as Brown's thing theory, he conceives of two separate object forms: the original object encountered in the landscape and a separate thing made through the artist's creation. In Williams's poetics these distinctions get represented in the terminology of the "local" and "universal." Williams advocates a form of local contact that grants access to some universal realm. The tension in Williams's work lies in this opposition between local and universal, as the poet strives to represent things in a manner authentic to both. I argue that his concepts of both the local and the universal require the subject to represent an individual experience of the object. The local object, even as it is transformed into a universalized thing, marks actual human contact and records the feelings, questions, desires, and anxieties generated through the subject's interaction. Further, Williams's concept of the universal allows him to forge connections between the individual subject and broader humanity. At stake is the very transformation of a culture as Williams privileges the subject's local experience to gain greater

knowledge of the conditions in which he lives. At a moment distinguished by the subject's isolation and fragmentation, Williams aims to inspire within his readers a communal sense that human experience can be universalized and shared.

While Williams focuses on a poetics of things that can reveal some transcultural and transhistorical form of "universal" experience, Oppen explores things to expose a subject testing his relations to materials—relations that must be historicized in relation to particular social and political conditions. In chapter four, "'The Sequence of Disclosure': The Truth Hidden in Things in George Oppen's *Discrete Series*," I focus on Oppen's exploration of objects in his first book, *Discrete Series* (1934), a series of experimental poems highlighting urban conditions in the midst of the Great Depression. In this text, Oppen explores the subject's relationship to objects of modern technology, exposing layers of meaning that often remain hidden in the subject's interaction. In contrast, he seeks to discover the "truth" hidden in things. Through his experimental use of syntax and the line, Oppen invites the reader to explore new relations to the materials; in the process, he models a stance of inquiry the reader can apply to objects in his own world. Oppen reveals the subject's diminished sense of agency in relation to modern technologies, as well as his alienation from natural objects that have become unreal and strange. The things of *Discrete Series* help expose conditions of labor, sexual power relations, and social ideologies that have limited the subject's knowledge of its own conditions. In exploring the poet's work specifically through its transformation of objects, I argue that Oppen proves distinctly modernist: a poet whose self-conscious act of making things out of the subject's material interaction reveals his larger preoccupation with the poet's function at a tumultuous moment in history.

My concluding chapter compares this fascination with things in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. For this post-modern poet, the “thing” reinforces the self’s fragmentation and insecurity, as well as her sense of isolation and separation from the objects she encounters. Bishop still engages in an elaborate process of looking, and her object undergoes a similar transformation into an aestheticized thing. I examine Bishop’s early poem “The Fish,” in which the fish becomes a marker encapsulating the speaker’s preoccupations with looking. For Bishop, the act of knowing—which for all of these poets involves projecting authority through form—takes place through acknowledgment and recognition, and the self’s genuine moment of connection and love for the object she examines. Yet, Bishop no longer strives for possession or authority, and the poet ultimately acknowledges the limitations of her knowledge. By contrasting Bishop to the modernist poets of my study, I evaluate how this group of American poets in the early twentieth century resolved preoccupations with poetic authority in their construction of things.

## Chapter One: “But I Was Going to Say When Truth Broke In”: Robert Frost and the Self-Projected Thing

When one considers the prominent focus on objects as “things” in modernist poetry, Robert Frost may not initially seem the poet to best epitomize this trend. Yet, a scan of titles in his early collections reveals Frost’s frequent consideration of objects. Titles such as “Mending Wall,” “The Mountain,” “A Hundred Collars,” “The Black Cottage,” “Blueberries,” “The Wood-Pile,” “Christmas Trees,” “The Telephone,” “Hyla Brook,” “The Oven Bird,” “Birches,” “The Exposed Nest,” and “Snow,”<sup>16</sup> all take the form of nouns or noun phrases, and the poems frequently follow a rhetorical pattern in which the speaker encounters an object and sets about to ruminate on the experience of interaction. Through Frost’s elevation of the individual voices and experiences of his speakers, he proves an ideal figure to illustrate the process of the object’s transformation into what, in his case, I am calling the “self-projected thing.” As Frost constructs things, he invests in them a particular version of identity that can stabilize him as a poet-figure of wisdom. In the process, he represses more anxious aspects of identity, particularly concerning masculinity and labor, which prove prominent for Frost and his speakers. Through things, Frost can negotiate two layers of anxieties: the speakers’ anxieties over their own conditions, with objects frequently becoming the vehicles around which they can explore epiphanies or wisdom; and the poet’s larger anxiety about the relationship between subjects and objects and the poet’s task to invest meaning in things.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These poems appear in Frost’s second or third collections, *North of Boston* (1914) and *Mountain Interval* (1916). Due to subtle revisions Frost made to these collections in later editions, I will be citing the original volumes.

<sup>17</sup> Nowhere in his correspondence or essays does Frost himself outline this trend I am identifying, nor does he frame his focus as one aimed at either objects or things. Nevertheless, the evidence lies in the poems themselves, wherein Frost’s objects often contain multiple unarticulated meanings. To borrow from Bill

To better position Frost's in relation to the modern trend I have been outlining, it is necessary to consider the way voice functions in his poems. The voice of a Frost poem can reflect the dialect of a particular speaking subject, or multiple speaking subjects in the case of his dialogue poems, with the poet positioned at some ironic distance from these speakers. At times, a narrative voice mediates or describes such characters, offering a poetic interpretation of their experiences. Yet, at other times this narrative speaker is reflecting on his own moments of encounter—in poems such as “The Wood-Pile” or “The Road Not Taken”—such that it is easy to imagine the speaker as Frost himself. Even in these poems, however, it is often possible to identify multiple rhetorical registers, or places where the voice shifts in tone and attitude. Analyzing voice in relation to the object becomes essential for locating precisely where Frost transforms anxiety into wisdom and turns personal insecurities into poetic authority.

This projection of wisdom through an assertive, masculine poetic voice fosters Frost's sense of his poetic persona. Both his pursuit of this version of identity, as well as his awareness of his own vulnerability in the process, prove essential qualities of Frost's modernism. Frost as the authoritative national poet of wisdom, the long-mythologized New England poet-farmer, what Frank Lentricchia has called “Robert Frost, famous American poet” (*MQ* 111); and Frost as the darker, more abstract and anxious speaker of “Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening” remain identifiable figures even for casual readers of his poetry. At times the earlier persona seems most dominant, given Frost's deliberate cultivation of a public persona that would cast him in the role of national bard, following in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.

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Brown's distinction, again, in Frost's work, things can be said to “name the object even as [they name] something else” (“Thing Theory” 5).

Through his near-constant travel for readings and other appearances across mainstream American culture, Frost successfully commodified this persona, becoming one of the highest-selling poets in American history. Yet, readers of Frost's poems have long identified with other, darker aspects of self.<sup>18</sup> A study of Frost's early work, before he emerges at the helm of middle-brow literary culture, reveals that Frost's cultivation of a poetic self was in fact fraught with a great deal more anxiety than his public persona suggests.

Lentricchia classifies Frost's early volumes, *North of Boston* (1914) and *Mountain Interval* (1916), as an intermediary period of experimentation between the neo-Romanticism of his first collection, *A Boy's Will* (1913) and "his final major transformation into the sententious poet of public fame who came to dominate most of what he wrote after the publication of his third volume" (94). This intermediary phase of Frost's career corresponds historically to Pound's development of Imagism, a fact that becomes more significant given Frost's composition of these books during his years in England from September 1912 through February 1915. While in England, during a particularly creative phase of 1913-1914, Frost spent time in the London literary scene interacting with figures such as T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint, and Ezra Pound as they were debating and formalizing theories on modernist poetics. Although in many ways Frost's version of modernism was distinctly separate from that of Imagism—he disavows free verse, for example, in his commitment to form, and his prominent use of metaphor

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<sup>18</sup> Among the earliest critics to point out this darker strain in Frost was Randall Jarrell, who in 1953 wrote, "Besides the Frost that everybody knows there is one whom no one even talks about" (28). Lionel Trilling extended this idea in his infamous speech delivered at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday party. Toasting the poet in attendance, Trilling remarked, "I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that little word. The universe he conceives of is a terrifying universe" (451).

contradicts Imagism's call for "direct treatment of the thing"—Frost was nevertheless taking up similar questions as his contemporaries in his engagement with objects and his move to invest them with meanings beyond their material or use value.

I borrow from Lentricchia's sense of the divisions within Frost's career to assess how things function in these early poems, when Frost is actively engaged in creating not only highly-crafted poetic objects but also a powerful poetic persona. Things, then, assist Frost in constructing a poetic self. Yet, even as Lentricchia recognizes distinct phases of Frost's career, he acknowledges the story as never simple: "It is a story that partially misrepresents, because it segregates what at Frost's most original was the fusion from early on, in a single literary impulse, of lyrical, narrative, dramatic, and didactic moods" (95). He finds the "deceptive" poems of Frost's first volume to speak most acutely to the varied impulses underlying Frost's poetics. Just as Lentricchia acknowledges the merging of diverse impulses within volumes, or even within individual poems, I argue that complicated impulses diverge within Frost's construction of things, which allow him to both repress anxieties and project poetic authority.

Karen Kilcup also finds Frost's career one in which the early books convey a man experimenting with self-representations. Kilcup's work adds an important dimension to my study because of her specific attention to gender. She argues that early in his career, Frost participates in feminine literary traditions as he expands representations of consciousness and selfhood, engendering what she calls a "poetics of empathy" (8).<sup>19</sup> He adopts poetic forms beyond the lyric—a form all too limited by the consciousness of the

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<sup>19</sup> Of the particular "feminine" traditions that Frost engages, Kilcup identifies Frost's "affiliations with American sentimental poetry, regionalist fiction and nonfiction, homoerotic writing, and premodern and early modern women's writing—including children's literature—while they outline readers' responses to his changing self-representation" (5).

“I”—to allow for “a different kind of self-conception on the part of the poet as well as an altered relationship to his or her audience; when poetry is defined only as lyric, many other possible performances of selfhood are excluded” (6-7). Despite these efforts in the early volumes, in later Frost, Kilcup traces four distinctly masculine voices encapsulating different aspects of self: “the wisecracking Yankee sage, popular and familiar in some sense but detached in another; the political critic, too invested in emotion and personality for high modernist taste; the bard; and the lyricist” (191-192). Thus, she concludes that Frost ultimately moves beyond the feminine to pursue a poetic identity on largely masculine terms. Kilcup’s work is useful for illustrating how Frost draws upon several poetic traditions and impulses in the books between *A Boy’s Will* (1913) and *New Hampshire* (1923). My conclusions diverge over how Frost deals with the question of a masculine or feminine poetics. I argue that Frost’s resolution of the conflict of self, even at this early stage, is always approached as a conflict between feminine passivity and masculine authority, with the poet-figure emerging in the realm of masculine creative control.<sup>20</sup>

Given this effort to trace particular shifts in Frost’s career, the “middle” phase of Frost’s second and third volumes becomes crucial, when the tensions of creating a poetic self prove most visible. In particular, one can trace anxieties through the poet’s engagement with objects in his environment. As he transforms objects into things, they

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<sup>20</sup> Katherine Kearns also finds Frost’s central conflict as fear of the ever-present, chaotic, and potentially-destructive feminine—images Frost projects through his representations of nature as a female force, as well as mothers, wives, and daughters. She notes that women throughout Frost’s work “rise to stand seductive in the forest, generative, metamorphic, and duplicitous, emblems of desire and death” (21). In contrast, the “work of manhood is, then to urge control on the uncontrollable, to impose upon its own ‘femaleness’—that which embodied in women seems so randomly destructive—moderation and orderliness.” Kearns characterizes Frost’s desire for poetic control as an effort to guard his manhood “against that which threatens the structural integrity” through things like “mothers, then lovers, wives, and daughters [that] eat away at the intact self” (29-30).

frequently mark un-resolvable aspects of the subject's experience and become devices through which Frost can project more stable authority. Because these concerns often cannot be resolved in the space of the poem's "reality"—within the landscapes and material conditions in which these speakers live—the poet-speaker achieves release through metaphor, a medium providing agency and control amidst feelings of alienation and powerlessness. In fact, metaphor is the most prominent device through which Frost transforms objects into things and, in the process, turns poetic preoccupations into wisdom.

What constitutes an "object" for Frost in these early volumes? Setting his poems in the rural landscapes "north of Boston," Frost most frequently takes up natural objects the speaker encounters in the landscape—trees, flowers, blueberries, apples, brooks, or birds—exploring how the poet can transform natural materials into artistic things, a question he poses explicitly in "The Oven Bird" when he asks "what to make of a diminished thing" (*MI* 35). Frost's thematic concerns with the quaint, rural, New England landscape can also be read as an attempt to explore human experience removed from the conditions of modern Industrial labor; yet, particular preoccupations over labor intrude, even in these secluded poetic spaces. When he chooses objects in the form of man-made transformations of nature—a pile of chopped wood, stones mounted into a wall, or a cellar hole dug into the ground—Frost manifests concern over the labor that changes natural objects into things reflecting complex social and ethical codes beyond their actual use value. Occasionally more threatening objects appear in the form of technology, such as the saw that kills a young boy in "Out, Out—," or the tree transformed into a telephone

pole in “An Encounter,” suggesting a consideration of the way modern technologies threaten masculinity and existing codes of labor.

Despite the variety of objects that appear, one way to consider them is through the relationship Frost stages between subject and object, demonstrated in the poem, “An Old Man’s Winter Night.” Here, he reveals a relationship where the subject may gaze at and ruminate upon objects, but the process of interpreting them reveals more about the subject’s conditions than those of the objects. In the poem, an old man looks out his window upon the night; yet, it is “all out of doors” that “looked darkly in at him,” while his eyes were “kept . . . from giving back the gaze” by “the lamp tilted near them in his hand” (15). As the man looks at objects, they literally look back, and we quickly see that his experience of things is through the experience of his own mind: “A light he was to no one but himself/ Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what/ A quiet light, and then not even that” (15-16).

Before he can fall into sleep, the man “[consigns] to the moon, such as she was,/ So late-arising, to the broken moon/ As better than the sun in any case/ For such a charge” (16). To dispel disturbed aspects of mind, he casts them outward, with the moon changing to the “broken moon.” This thing is “better than the sun” for such a task because it allows the man to consign away darker, unsettled notions of self. And this man is clearly unsettled as he ponders his place in “that creaking room” where he stood “with barrels around him—at a loss” (15). He has been walking in and out, a habit he claims has “scared the cellar under him/ In clomping there, he scared it once again/ In clomping off;—and scared the outer night.” Yet, the personification of the cellar with human fear illustrates how the actual object becomes a self-projected thing: in fact, it is the man who

contains and then reassigns this emotion. When the poem ends, “One aged man—one man—can’t fill a house/ A farm, a countryside, or if he can,/ It’s thus he does it of a winter night,” Frost suggests that the man cannot gain a sense of wholeness against feelings of lonely alienation, except through the possibilities posed by such a winter night. Even as he looks out upon the landscape, it is the man’s self-focused gaze that grants him a sense of peace. While the degree of peace can be debated—for within the poem it is certainly ambiguous—Frost suggests a stance toward objects that animates them by way of the subject’s own condition. The poem also carries implications for the poet’s own act of representation, wherein the poet explores “the roar/ Of trees and crack of branches, common things” to better understand human experience. By the poem’s end, Frost suggests the uncertainty of ever gaining definitive knowledge; he exposes the instability of any man’s ability to “fill a house” and know the darker aspects of his own mind. The pursuit of such knowledge through “a winter night” remains an ambiguous achievement.

### **To Be A Swinger of Birches: Creating a Poetic Self**

Two other early poems demonstrate Frost’s process of constructing the self-projected thing: “Birches” and “Wild Grapes.” A close reading of these poems allows us to trace the connections between them to analyze two concerns Frost faces in gaining poetic authority—preoccupations over gender in what it means to assert “control” over one’s environment; and preoccupations over what it means to define a self through creative labor. These issues have clear correlations to the modern moment: as changing gender roles and forms of labor in relation to identity become more unstable, Frost’s own sense of poetic identity is distinguished by these concerns.

In a roughly six-month span from late-1912 to early-1913—his first winter in England following British publisher David Nutt’s acceptance of his first book—Frost had one of his most creative periods, resulting in a series of poems that would change American poetry. As Jay Parini recounts in *Robert Frost: A Life* (1999), “By late spring (1913), nearly a dozen finished poems lay on his desk, including ‘Mending Wall,’ ‘Home Burial,’ ‘After Apple-Picking,’ and ‘Birches’—four of the best-known poems in the whole of American literature” (123). Although Frost did not include “Birches” in his second collection, *North of Boston* (1914), withholding it for inclusion in *Mountain Interval* (1916), its development alongside several earlier poems suggests that “Birches” engages similar questions and themes.<sup>21</sup>

In an unpublished 1950 essay, Frost described “Birches” as “two fragments soldered together so long ago I have forgotten where the joint is” (*CP* 162). Indeed, two distinct impulses operate within “Birches,” which reveal important tensions about the subject’s relation to the object: Does the self exist in passive relation to his or her environment (and, as we will see, the gendered nature of this experience becomes prominent for Frost), or can the poet actively construct a sense of selfhood? Although one narrative within “Birches” points to the latter—with Frost relying upon metaphor to solidify this constructed self—the poem complicates such an interpretation. Despite every active assertion of poetic authority, Frost reveals the vulnerability inherent within these claims through his representation of the birches as conveying repressed anxieties. Nevertheless, the forward-sweeping birch trees become the vehicle through which Frost

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<sup>21</sup> The poem first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1915, along with “The Road Not Taken,” and “The Sound of the Trees.” It is not Frost’s act of withholding the poem that most interests me, since Frost had a habit of withholding poems for later publication. Rather, I am interested here in the intersections of “Birches” with themes found throughout the poems of *North of Boston*.

can create a new poetic persona. By presenting multiple possibilities for the thing's meaning, Frost illustrates how things can reflect complicated, and even conflicted, aspects of the subject's experience—allowing Frost to overcome anxieties and project authority.

At a plot level, the poem offers two narrative explanations for how the birch trees became bent: the first half of the poem deals explicitly with the fact of the ice storms, while the second half imagines a young boy who swings the birches into submission. Although Frost begins the poem with his preference, “I like to think some boy's been swinging them,” he immediately turns to the “truth” of the crushing ice storms that “bend them down to stay”:

Ice storms do that. Often you must have seen them  
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
After a rain. They click upon themselves  
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored  
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snowcrust—  
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen. (*MI* 37)

Harsh external conditions are destructive forces upon the object: The weight of the ice bends the branches that prove unable to withstand such external pressure. In fact, the weight of Frost's description is also on the ice, rather than on the bare branches. When he notes that “They click upon themselves,” the ambiguous antecedent refers to the same “them” of the previous line—the birch trees (“Often you must have seen them/ Loaded with ice”). Nevertheless, the “they” that clicks is not the bare branches, but some version of these branches in which the ice covering dominates the object's identity. The ice clicks as the branches collide “and turn many-colored/ As the stir cracks and crazes their

enamel.” The speaker views the object not as a tree that happens to be bent, but as a thing forced into submission by some external quality; he cannot see the branches as separate from their ice covering. The metaphor of “enamel” suggests the ice as something altering the branches’ external identity, changing their gloss to reflect a different exterior. Frost, then, presents the trees via a layer that transforms their very existence and purpose, for it is this “enamel” that forces the trees downward against the upward trajectory of their own growth.

Once the ice “shatters” and “avalanches,” the speaker presents a second metaphor for the ice, now as “broken glass,” suggestive of refractive shards that alter perspective. Frost links this glass to “the inner dome of heaven,” a realm the young swinger will also try to access in the poem’s second part. If we are reading this fragment as a metaphor of self, the glass represents some impenetrable layer through which the subject cannot proceed. Nonetheless, it is a layer that coats the self, limiting it by external threats and pressures, and transforms the object’s organic state with an artificial gloss that naturalizes these constrictions. These forces prove so severe that even freed from their ice encasing, the birches remain victimized and bent. At this point Frost genders this form of destruction, when he connects it to a simile of the trees “trailing their leaves on the ground/ Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair/ Before them over their heads to dry them in the sun” (38). The simile is jarring, given that it connects the earlier violent destruction to girls bent in almost carefree flirtation. Nevertheless, the violence present in the poem’s opening lines threatens even within the simile, as the poem captures the girls in a pose evoking clear sexual playfulness or vulnerability. In the process, Frost genders female the passive self that accepts external forces of destruction.

The poem takes a sharp turn, with the speaker's announcement, "But I was going to say when Truth broke in/ With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm/ (Now I am free to be poetical?)" Frost included this parenthetical line in the poem's first presentations, both in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in *Mountain Interval*. However, in his first *Selected Poems* (1923), Frost removed the line and never restored it to later editions. Despite Frost's reservations about the parenthetical line, it highlights a particular tension in his sense of selfhood between the "Truth" of real-world restrictions upon the subject and the opportunities available in one's freedom to be "poetical." Frost could not fully embark on his poetical representation of the birches—the narrative in which he has "some boy bend them/ As he went out and in to fetch the cows"—until he resolves, or in fact represses, particular anxieties that "Truth" poses. The poem must deal with the "Truth" before Frost can move into another realm. In that sense, the image of the girls becomes one encapsulating the threats upon and vulnerabilities within the subject; yet, it also serves as an image through which Frost can confront—and move past—these anxieties in his own poetic pursuits. He creates an alternative metaphor of identity in the figure of the boy, who embarks on just this very action. Alone among the trees, too far from town to play baseball, the boy gains creative control over the landscape:

One by one he subdued his father's trees  
By riding them down over and over again  
Until he took the stiffness out of them,  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left  
For him to conquer.

The masculine elements of this form of "conquest" are significant: it is the father's trees that the speaker aims to "subdue" and control, while he presents the act of "swinging" in

sexualized imagery of “riding” the branches until “not one but hung limp.”<sup>22</sup> Swinging upon birches becomes a metaphorical act of creation and domination, in what proves a particular model for writing the poem itself. To be a “swinger of birches” is to exert poetic control over the object by transforming it into metaphor.<sup>23</sup> Frost acknowledges the power residing within metaphor in his well-known essay “Education by Poetry” (1931), where he states, “Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, ‘grace’ metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking we have” (*CP* 104). Defending his stance that youth need an “education by poetry,” he warns that people lacking the ability to read metaphor “don’t know how to judge an editorial. . . . don’t know how to judge a political campaign. . . . don’t know when they are being fooled by a metaphor, an analogy, a parable” (103). Accordingly, one who creates metaphor has the capacity to shape and control meaning. Frost warns that larger metaphorical systems, including scientific metaphors, such as evolution, infiltrate all discourses and shape everyday thought, influencing the way humanity understands itself. Readers are under threat when they cannot analyze the forces at play within the metaphor and thus cannot recognize the abstract ideas exerting control over their lives. On the other hand, being able to assess where metaphor breaks down grants the opportunity to determine where the self can reclaim authority over meaning. Frost concludes:

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<sup>22</sup> Parini also notes the sexual undertones of the poem, observing that “the poem re-creates the curve of desire found in the sexual act, from anticipation, exhilaration, and fulfillment to the letting down at the end” (137).

<sup>23</sup> In a 1933 letter to his son Carol, who was then attempting to write his own poetry, Frost also characterizes poetic creation as asserting masculine control over the landscape. He writes his son, “You have hammered it close and hard and you have rammed it full of all sorts of things, observations both of nature and human nature—and humor and picturesqueness too. And best of all, as Marge says, it is no sissy poem such as I get from poetic boys generally...” (Barry 107). The hyper-masculine language of “hammering” the poem into form and “ramming” it with objects, suggests that poetic creation involves force, control, and rugged manual labor. The poem then becomes a labored act equivalent in value to other forms of masculine labor. The threat of the “sissy” poem is one that fails to grant the poet this degree of control and, in the process, fails to capture “human nature.”

What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, ... you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science. You are not safe in history. (106)

Frost confirms his gendered thinking about metaphor in "Home Burial," in which a grieving wife and husband remain at odds about how each suffers over the loss of a child. Central to the poem is the couple's inability to communicate, as the husband decries, "My words are nearly always an offence./ I don't know how to speak of anything/ So as to please you" (*NOB* 47). He adds, "A man must partly give up being a man/ With women-folk." To the wife, the husband's most unforgiveable offense was his very action of burying the son, of digging up the earth in which he deposits the child and then returning to the house, where he "[talks] about [his] everyday concerns" (49). She recounts, "I can repeat the very words you were saying. 'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/ Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'" She has overheard her husband working through his grief by transforming it into metaphor, but she cannot grasp the layered meaning. Instead, she concludes that her husband felt nothing about his loss: "Think of it, talk like that at such a time!/ What had how long it takes a birch to rot/ To do with what was in the darkened parlour./ You couldn't care!" (50). The wife has failed to recognize metaphor as the very means through which her husband addresses his complicated feelings of grief; the metaphor exposes, represses, and sublimates them in a manner that allows him to function at this extreme moment. Here, Frost again places metaphor in the domain of masculinity, as a means of communication that allows things

(again, here, a birch tree) to reflect difficult aspects of the subject's experience.

Connecting the lost child to a rotted birch fence links it to anxieties within the man's identity, his sense of masculinity and his self-definition as a laborer. The metaphor contains an un-resolvable tension: What happens when the very product of a man's labor, the fruit of his own creation, proves so vulnerable in the world?

Given the prominence of metaphor within Frost's theory of poetics, it is worth considering how metaphor fosters the desired conquest Frost acknowledges in "Birches." In "The Constant Symbol" (1946) he claims that metaphor contains the potential for deception and repression. Calling it "the chiefest" thing about poetry, Frost defines metaphor as "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority" (*CP* 147). The first two aspects of this definition carry slightly different implications: to say one thing in terms of another is to draw an unexpected correlation between the objects united in the metaphor; on the other hand, to say one thing and mean another suggests a deceptive effort to recast "truth" in some less offensive or undesired form. The third aspect, "the pleasure of ulteriority," also implies the presence of things intentionally concealed. In this sense, metaphor becomes a safe means to say things the speaker thinks must be hidden, repressed, or denied; it allows the speaker to sublimate repressed anxieties or desires by marrying them with objects that can both contain and refract the troubled aspects of self. When used in just this manner, the object becomes a thing through which the poet can assert some control over the process of solidifying a self.

Frost's near-complete retreat into metaphor in the second half of "Birches," then, reveals a great deal about how he views his poetic project: to reshape the self in

metaphorical terms. Just as the boy reaches climactic triumph over the birches, “flung outward, feet first, with a swish,/ Kicking his way down through the air to the ground,” the speaker’s voice re-emerges, acknowledging a clear personal connection: “So was I once myself a swinger of birches./ And so I dream of going back to be” (39). The impulse underlying this poetic diversion into metaphor has been the desire to reclaim a previous sense of self, and one firmly established around masculine energy and values and a sense of purpose that have since come under threat, as well as a moment of childhood when the possibilities for power and pleasure remained endless. In contrast, the speaker is now “weary of considerations” when “life is too much like a pathless wood”—a line that harkens back to “The Road Not Taken,” which was published with “Birches” in its first appearance in the *Atlantic*—with slashes across his face from intruding branches. When he admits, “I’d like to get way from earth awhile,” he comes the closest at any point in the poem to casting this metaphorical move as a deliberate retreat from real-world anxieties and concerns (nevertheless presented here in metaphorical terms). The speaker quickly qualifies that he does not want to be removed from life, for “Earth’s the right place for love:/ I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.” Yet, this platitude fails to resolve the tensions Frost’s speaker has revealed, as he ends the poem again by falling back into the figure of himself as a swinger of birches climbing toward heaven. In this second fragment, the dome of heaven does not shatter; instead, the tree “could bear no more,/ But dipped its top and set me down again,” with the speaker noting, “That would be both good going and coming back” (40). Frost has rewritten the anxious representation of a subject plagued by destructive external forces through the metaphor of a boy attaining harmony and control, and even potential access to heaven—a realm of wisdom

that Frost can only nudge toward with the generic platitude he offers near the poem's end. To "be a swinger of birches" is to enact a form of poetic authority that will allow the speaker to overcome the preoccupations marking his interaction with the material world.<sup>24</sup>

Frost's impulse to represent poetic authority as a masculine pursuit is further displayed in "Wild Grapes," a poem Frost includes in his fourth collection, *New Hampshire* (1923). He elsewhere describes the poem as connected to "Birches" through "an inner logic I don't have to account for" (CP 194).<sup>25</sup> Frost recounts the inspiration for the later poem:

The birch of "Wild Grapes" was one a girl swung in when she didn't weigh enough to bring it to earth. She told me about it eighty years later and asked me to write a poem about it for girls to match the other birch poem that she claimed was written for boys. She clenched her hands in memory of the pain of having had to hang on in the tree for too long. I had to write the poem for her because she was the first editor ever to publish me. Her name was Susan Hayes Ward. (194-195)

The explicit connection of these poems to gendered experiences proves significant, but equally as interesting is Frost's attention to his first editor, who as literary editor of *The Independent*, published several of Frost's poems in the 1890s. Frost gives voice to this

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<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note the contrast between Frost's easy assertion of authority through metaphor and the more frustrated experience Williams displays in his own birches poem, "Portrait of the Author." Both poets are, nevertheless, engaged in asserting meaning over the object in the very act of representation.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Bacon first explored the connection between these two poems, positioning "Wild Grapes" as the feminine response to "Birches." Her reading, however, presents "Wild Grapes" as reflecting Frost's debt to certain Western literary precursors, most significantly Euripides' *Bacchae*. She reads the grapes as Biblical and mythological symbols evoking the Western canon. My own reading of the grapes as the self-projected thing allows for an interpretation beyond symbolic value, while acknowledging that the object can carry literal, symbolic, and metaphorical meaning all at once.

figure—who, as Bacon points out, he credited with discovering him—as a female speaker recounting the traumatic moment at the age of five when she cannot let go of the birch branch from which she is hanging. Self-described as “a little boyish girl” who “my brother could not always leave at home” (*PRF* 196), the child follows the boy in pursuit of the wild grapes that dangle temptingly from the branches. The brother initially climbs the birches and throws the grapes down, but he quickly reaches for a higher branch, telling the girl to “take a treetop, I’ll get down another./ Hold on with all your might when I let go” (197). The child’s meager frame cannot bend the branches: “The minute it was left with me alone,/ It caught me up as if I were the fish/ And it the fishpole. So I was translated.” The metaphor of being “translated” into a fish under a pole’s pursuit—another potentially violent image with threatening sexual undertones—has implications for the act of “translating” experience into a poem. This speaker lacks the active control of the swinging boy in “Birches”; she is not doing the translating, but is being translated by other forces. (This also corresponds with the fact that Frost is crafting the poem *for* his editor, translating her experience through his own poetic labor.)

An earlier comment echoes this sense of being hunted or caught, when the speaker characterizes the memory as “the day I swung suspended with the grapes,/ And was come after like Eurydice” (196). Her brother later likens the girl to the grapes in a move that further emphasizes this sense of vulnerability in the face of ravaging hunters:

“Now you know how it feels,” my brother said,  
“To be a bunch of fox grapes, as they call them,  
That when it thinks it has escaped the fox  
By growing where it shouldn’t—on a birch,  
Where a fox wouldn’t think to look for it—  
And if he looked and found it, couldn’t reach it—  
Just then come you and I to gather it.” (198)

The brother echoes a masculine position, presenting the girl as in a place she “shouldn’t” be; once there, she is rendered vulnerable to dangers she has no skills to overcome. The brother’s metaphor comparing the girl to the wild grapes—the objects highlighted in the title—provides for the same kind of self-reflective thing found in “Birches”: These grapes encapsulate the child’s feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, weakness and dependence (since they have grown around and upon the birch branches), as well as her sense of wildness in being an un-feminine girl. Yet, because the brother presents this metaphor, rather than the girl herself, Frost again suggests the limitations of experience that is gendered female. Instead, the male asserts control over meaning. This notion of male power corresponds to the poem’s plot: The child escapes the branches only through her brother’s rescue, with her brother admonishing her, “Don’t you weigh anything?” (199). The suggestion of weightlessness furthers the idea that the speaker possesses an empty sense of self. She is a victim caught in overwhelming conditions that threaten to take her “off ... by birch trees into space.”

The key question of the poem becomes: Does this speaker gain any opportunity for a metaphorical rewriting of self? Although the wild grapes serve to encapsulate negative anxieties of self, does the speaker emerge from her interaction with these objects with a new consciousness of her identity? Does she project a new sense of self by transforming them into things? The final stanza becomes an interesting place to explore these questions because it shifts in both tone and content from a literal recounting of the day’s events to a philosophical consideration of what it means to “let go,” again putting focus on the speaker’s act of holding onto an object as she explores questions of identity. This metaphorical move invites questions about the implications of the very act of

“letting go” the child has been attempting throughout the poem. Up until the final stanza, a simple reading of the poem’s “moral” might reveal an argument about the importance of letting go, particularly when confronted with one’s own limitations and inherent fears. Yet, the speaker complicates such a reading when she claims that her problem was less “not weighing anything” than it was “not knowing anything.” She is Eve before the fall. It is lack of knowledge that keeps the child clinging to the tree—lack of knowledge of the lasting consequences of either move, to cling or to let go. In contrast, the speaker now knows the painful effects of loss, and the final stanza conveys her regret about the fact that one must let things go:

I had not taken the first step in knowledge;  
I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
As still I have not learned to with the heart,  
And have no wish to with the heart—nor need,  
That I can see. The mind—is not the heart.  
I may yet live, as I know others live,  
To wish in vain to let go with the mind—  
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

The speaker talks of “letting go of the mind” as a process one engages in before sleep, when clearing anxious clutter prepares the mind for unconscious renewal. Although she acknowledges that most people attempt this task “in vain,” the desire remains. Ideal existence would be one with a mind released from conscious pain and past loss. But the heart, a different matter, cannot let go. The poem’s final impulse seems to be at odds with the very theme the speaker has been developing throughout: If the story has been about a child who had to let go of the branch to fall safely back to earth, the speaker here resists her own moral. In fact, she has internalized the opposite response: she cannot let go, but holds on. The ability to move on from loss becomes the great anxious undertone of the

poem, particularly for a speaker whose sense of self in the world is one of vulnerability and powerlessness; as in “Birches,” Frost has gendered female these more negative and weaker aspects of self.

This poem carries significance in relation to “Birches” not only because it extends certain issues of gender, but also because it suggests a familiar theme of poetic labor. What type of poetic voice is capable of translating experience into art? What personal preoccupations must be “let go” for the poet to project authority? While I have suggested that the poem’s objects underscore the speaker’s anxieties about “letting go”—thus becoming things encapsulating problematic aspects of her experience—they also become the vehicle through which Frost can “let go” of preoccupations to present an authoritative poetic identity. Here, the textual history of this poem’s inspiration proves significant, given Susan Hayes Ward’s place in launching Frost’s poetic career. When his early poem “My Butterfly: An Elegy” was accepted for publication in 1894 by William Hayes Ward of *The Independent*—his first ever poem published in a professional journal—Frost promptly began regular correspondence with the journal’s literary editor, William’s sister Susan. Beginning in April of 1894 and continuing for several years, Susan’s correspondence remained a source of encouragement and support. Yet, at this early—and highly vulnerable—stage of his career, when Frost’s burgeoning poetic identity was under considerable threat, his correspondence with both of the Hayes Wards reveals several insecurities. Writing to William in response to his poem’s acceptance, “If you mean what might be called the legitimate education I have received when you speak of ‘training’ and ‘line of study,’ I hope that the quality of my poem would seem to account

for far more of this than I have really had. I am only graduated of a public high school” (SL 19).<sup>26</sup> In another early letter to Susan, he admits,

I have never read Lanier’s poetry nor the volume of his you mention. I have read no technical works. The extent of my studying now is a little Greek and, for relaxation, French. . . . Homer is very difficult for me as yet, though, and I am often entirely discouraged. But I assure you, in some time, money or no money, I shall prove myself able to do everything but spell. (21)

The young Frost betrays a sense of anxiety about his deficiencies in what a professional literary audience might consider the requirements of any aspiring poet. Instead, Frost must recast these expectations to assert his own notions of a poetic self, shaped through his values and strengths. In a sense, Frost is both identifying with the young girl’s vulnerabilities and lack of knowledge, and working to assert a new sense of masculine authority in the act of crafting the poem. Thus, “Wild Grapes” encapsulates many of the same tensions over feminine passivity and masculine agency we have seen in “Birches.” Frost accomplishes a sense of authority by rewriting his relationship to Susan Hayes Ward—which began with him in a position of vulnerability at the mercy of editors who could validate or discourage his poetic aspirations—in his rendering of the girl child in “Wild Grapes.” By reversing the dynamic of power and authority, he becomes the figure “translating” the woman’s experience into poetic creation; through the brother’s metaphor connecting the girl to the wild grapes, Frost again asserts a masculine connection between identity and creation. While the girl clings to the branch, as well as

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<sup>26</sup> There is every reason to believe that Frost was speaking honestly about his academic deficiencies. At this point, he had attended Dartmouth College for less than one semester in 1892, but had dropped out, later explaining, “I wasn’t suited for the place” (Parini 37).

to other heart-breaking losses, Frost fashions a poetic identity as one who can “let go”—or reshape experience to diminish vulnerabilities of self. Creating a position of ironic distance from the poem’s speaker, Frost emphasizes the need to move beyond such underlying limitations in order to transcend toward this ideal. Tensions must be repressed and refracted; they must be buried within the “ulteriority” of the metaphor for the poet to assert and create a new, more stable sense of self.

### **Voice as the Vehicle for Projecting a Self**

I have thus far traced Frost’s use of the self-projected thing for the development of his poetic persona. His use of things, however, carries larger implications about how Frost viewed his function as a poet—to reflect the experiences of a subject and, in the process, express conditions that were common at his particular moment in history. To this end, my study extends the work of two Frost critics also examining the poet’s treatment of objects in relation to the self. In the recent *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery: The House Abandoned* (2008), Merit J. MacArthur examines Frost’s repeated attention to the abandoned farmhouse, concluding that for Frost this thing reflects biographical and national concerns over socio-cultural conditions. She notes, “The imaginative scene of the abandoned or ruined farmhouse in his poetry evokes at once Frost’s own family history and his dark romanticization of America’s rural past, as he transposed Wordsworth’s ‘The Ruined Cottage’ onto the cellar holes and abandoned farms of the American landscape” (34). Frost’s upbringing was notable for its lack of financial stability, structure, and geographic roots—as MacArthur points out, he moved more than 26 times by the age of 26 (40), enduring the hardships of his father’s gambling, drinking and early death, when Frost was 11, of tuberculosis. MacArthur

suggests that Frost's creation of the farmhouse allows him to resolve these personal tensions and overcome insecurities about his own biography: his longing for stability, his desire for connection with the landscape, and his nostalgia for rural forms of labor.

MacArthur's reading supports my larger claim that the poetic medium provides Frost the opportunity for authority and control. His creative acts compensate for feelings of lack, as he cultivates a symbol of familial and financial security, despite the fact that his own attempts at farming were largely a failure. What Frost could not cultivate through the land, he seeks to do through his poems; through the thing, he can project a stable identity. In the figure of the farmhouse, Frost preserves a particular version of self associated with a landscape, the New England farm, to which he would forever be linked.

Frank Lentricchia's *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (1975) also links Frost's uses of objects to his particular subjective experience, arguing that Frost's poems present "landscapes"—rich textures of materiality from the poet's surrounding environment—in order to reveal the experience of the speaking subject. Lentricchia draws clear links between Robert Frost and the pragmatism of William James, arguing that the poet's rendering of his landscapes reflects a "sculpting act of consciousness" (11) that allows Frost to write a self into being: "Whether the object is mediated by the consciousness of the lyric 'I,' or whether the object is mediated by Frost's more fully dramatized selves—the personae of his longer dialogues and monologues—the psychic life of Robert Frost himself is what is ultimately evoked by the fixed objects in his poetic landscape" (15). Lentricchia's study, like that of MacArthur, provides intervention with psychological and phenomenological notions of selfhood, as he explores how certain recurrent symbols can be read as "acts of the mind." I am also

reading Lentricchia's notion of the "landscape" in Frost's use of things: his rendering of material objects such that the object can be both thing-unto-itself *and* a separate thing revealing significant meanings about the subject. Yet, I want to push the approach presented by Lentricchia and MacArthur beyond Frost's own biography and persona, for his exploration of things reflects a more democratic impulse: to explore the experiences and conditions of rural people and to respond to broader conditions shaping modern subjectivity. Many of his poems throughout *North of Boston* take the form of dialogue poems and dramatic monologues presented in the voices of varied speakers. This attention to multiple experiences of subjectivity suggests that Frost was attuned to the universality of particular modern difficulties, specifically the aforementioned concerns over gender and labor. As Frost's landscapes reveal subjects facing common and identifiable preoccupations, the poet can position himself and his representations as serving an essential cultural function.

To this end, voice becomes an important device for Frost in exploring human experience and transforming objects into things. In *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977), Richard Poirier explores voice as one of the techniques adding complexity to the frequently simplistic, moralistic narratives Frost poems seem to produce. He points out, "A poetry often designed to 'seem to the casual person altogether obvious' is therefore, philosophically speaking, extraordinarily, purposefully evasive. Entailed in this process are disciplines and flexibilities of mind" (xii). Although metaphor, as articulated in the previous section, does allow for this kind of evasion, Frost is not engaged in a simple act of deception but rather a poetic process that proves enormously complicated. He often conveys the difficulty of expressing a subject's experience through the speakers' dialogue

and vocal patterns. Close attention to voice reveals the speakers' conflicts, as well as Frost's own difficulties in asserting authoritative meaning through things.

Poirier recognizes the complications and forms of "chaos" that evoke multiple possibilities of meaning, but he argues that Frost's chaos cannot be reduced to the conditions of modernity: "The important difference between Frost and certified modernists like Eliot and Joyce is that his 'chaos' compared to theirs has no historical localizations" (40). Instead, he finds that any feelings of psychological alienation in a Frost poem precede the speaker's broader encounters with history and culture (41). Poirier rests this facet of his argument on the formal dimensions of the poetics, specifically voice: since Frost's speakers "usually help create the structurings that are to include them" (40)—in other words, reflect "human figures" participating vocally in the creation of the poem and thus exercising some control over formal elements that determine meaning—Poirier assumes a representation of subjectivity that precedes its interaction with materiality: the speaking subject exists before it engages the surrounding world. My study challenges this idea, showing how Frost's speaking subjects are actually negotiating a sense of selfhood through their encounters with situations and material objects, and ones often historically localized. In the process, Frost frequently stands in a position of critical distance from his speakers, as we have seen in "Wild Grapes."

To this end, Poirier's discussion of the two poles of metaphor and voice proves useful. He argues that "voice" exists in dialectical play with metaphor and that a poem's meaning emerges from this very tension (10): "The voice, when it gets anxious about the metaphor it is using, is, again, involved with what it has helped create or evoke, with versions of reality or of poetry or of the 'other' in which the self has chosen to find a

‘reflection.’” (22). Of significance here is Poirier’s characterization of the speaking subject’s “anxiety” over his or her own speech act and the implications of creation. This anxiety is also apparent in Frost’s own engagement with the poetic act. As demonstrated above, Frost’s writings on metaphor present this formal device as granting the poet authority and control, since metaphor creates a “version of reality” in which the speaker can assert a particular identity reflected through its environment. Poirier’s recognition of anxiety at precisely these moments suggests the way that voice can work against metaphor. Tension results when a particular version of identity can be called into question and the speaker acknowledges the difficulty of fixing meaning.

The poems, then, invite questions about the relationship of voice to self: Does the linguistic act solidify, through metaphor, a stable self, thus making the speech act a speaking subject’s empowered claim? Or is the subject still aware of its vulnerabilities to the socio-cultural and ideological structures that have determined its place? It comes down to a question of the possible contingency of the self: its actual constructedness by social and historical forces versus the poet’s Romantic longing to believe in himself as self-created and sovereign. In fact, although Frost remains engaged in a conscious act of poetic creation, his poems often suggest the very limitations of their own forms. In this sense, they underscore the tensions of a modern world in which metaphor can no longer guaranty relief from overwhelming anxieties about selfhood—when the metaphor of the “swinger of birches” cannot allow the speaker to overcome traveling through a “pathless wood.” This particular dialectic between metaphor and voice reminds readers about the limitations even of metaphor, as well as the difficulties of accessing some final meaning.

Voice becomes another means through which Frost exposes the poet's preoccupations with fixing things to stabilize the self.<sup>27</sup>

Frost's ideas about voice, the vocal registers of a poem, and his theories on the "sound of sense" are well-known. During the years of 1912-1915, while figures such as T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint, and Ezra Pound were debating theories on modernist poetics, Frost was formulating his own ideas about applying regular speech rhythms in poetry.<sup>28</sup> Most of Frost's discussions on sound take place in his letters to friends. Although he intended to write an essay encapsulating his theories,<sup>29</sup> he never completed such a formal presentation of his ideas. Instead, as critics such as Karen Kilcup and Tyler Hoffman have pointed out, he appears to have moved beyond some of these early theories of sound (if he actually applied them at all), given that many of his later poems become less focused on dialogue and speech rhythms, and more attentive to metrical forms.<sup>30</sup> Yet,

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<sup>27</sup> Jason Isaac Mauro finds that Frost actually works against the construction of a stable sense of self. He thus positions Frost as working against William James, for whom "the self must hold fort against the encroachments from a destructive and threatening world" (96). Instead, he argues, for Frost "the real drama of consciousness involves the self's recognition that it is implicated in, and inextricably part of the confusion and chaos of the world, and that the self's formulations and attempts to order this world have their own due quotient of destructive unintelligibility." Although I find Frost more Jamesian than Mauro's reading suggests, his work effectively illustrates the limits within Frost's poetically-constructed notion of self.

<sup>28</sup> Tyler Hoffman argues that Frost's development of a poetic "theory" at this moment was a self-conscious response to ideas about Imagism and modern art circulating on the London scene. In fact, it was through conversations with Hulme and Flint that Frost refined his ideas on the subject. However, as Hoffman argues, this was not an effort to compete with the principles of Imagism (which Frost, in his adamant position against free verse, largely rejected), but rather to bolster the kind of poetry he was writing. Hoffman finds Frost's frequent defense of his theories to John Bartlett an effort "to show him in a new light, to disabuse critics of the idea that he is a rude regional poet and promote the view of himself as a careful craftsman—a sophisticated practitioner of verse" (18).

<sup>29</sup> Frost told John T. Bartlett, in a letter of February 22, 1914, "I write it partly for my own benefit, to clarify my ideas for an essay or two I am going to write some fine day (not far distant)" (Barry 66).

<sup>30</sup> Kilcup traces the move away from more feminized poetic forms in the books after *New Hampshire*, where Frost withdraws into lyric ambiguities and greater detachment of self. Of these later poems, she notes, "In many of Frost's lyrics. . . the poet is simultaneously absent and present, elusive and rock-hard: absent, for the 'sophisticated' reader, and transparently present, for the popular, 'naïve,' mainstream reader" (192). In Hoffman's formalist analysis of Frost's poetry, he concludes that there were always inconsistencies between Frost's theories and his practice, where even in early poems (such as "Birches"), he seems to favor "poetical" devices such as alliteration and assonance for conveying meaning, rather than

voice remains of undeniable significance in both *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*, which feature numerous dialogue poems, as well as poems giving voice to working-class people speaking through and about their environments.

Frost describes his theory on sound in a July 4, 1913, letter: “I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. . . . The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words” (Barry 59). This idea privileges voice as the carrier of meaning: even if an over-hearer cannot make out the words behind a door, he or she can, theoretically, still determine the conversation’s emotional meaning. Thus, Frost finds that the “abstract vitality of our speech” summons “pure sound—pure form”—and, by extension, pure meaning. Yet, he explains that natural speech rhythms alone are not sufficient for making poetry:

If one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity or accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is a resultant from these two. (60)

Here, he again suggests a distinction between the speaking subject in a poem and the poet “skillfully breaking” the speaker’s language to tame it within the form. Elaine Barry argues that Frost’s commitment to craft and his effort to harness natural speech reflect his

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the rhythms of actual speech (7). Thus, Hoffman finds Frost’s commitment to form to be dominant from the beginning.

fear of insanity, which caused him “to fear the lack of such inner structure”(20).<sup>31</sup> This idea corresponds to his often-cited idea in “The Figure a Poem Makes” that poetry represents “a momentary stay against confusion” (*CP* 132), as well as extends Poirier’s point about the anxiety that accompanies any speech act. Frost’s commitment to form reflects an underlying acknowledgment of instabilities within the speaker’s mind. It also recognizes the poet’s authority to gain formal control over a given speaker’s troubled condition.

Particular anxieties inherent within form become even more evident in the way Frost genders the dynamics of speech and writing: natural rhythms versus poetic craft. Kilcup reads Frost’s desire to marry these two distinct rhetorical forms—the feminine realm of speech and the masculine realm of writing—as his attempt to dismantle the binary nature of this opposition. Instead, by emphasizing the speaking voice in the poem, he presents democratic ideals and a commitment to multiplicity. Indeed, Frost’s move suggests a desire, at least initially, to grant the speaking subject significant authority over selfhood. He credits intonation as carrying “the living part of the poem . . . entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence” (Barry 61), advancing the argument that voice carries the strongest clues to meaning. He also claims that the “sentence sound often says more than the word. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite of the words” (66). Sound becomes a device for forcing dominant themes to the front of a sentence, Frost’s primary unit of sense. Hoffman draws a similar conclusion about Frost’s emphasis on individualism when he states:

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<sup>31</sup> Frost endured a legacy of mental illness in his family, most notably with his sister Jeanie, who spent the final nine years of her life confined in a permanent state hospital. Frost saw traces of such insanity in himself in his severe bouts of depression, as well as in his own children, at least two of whom suffered mental illness: Frost’s son Carol committed suicide in 1940, and his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947.

Frost's concept of the "sound of sense" ought to be read as an element of opposition to culture at a time when, as Christopher Reed argues with respect to the Bloomsbury group, "a rhetoric of individualism could be conceived as a radical act." We must understand Frost's prosodic commitment as deeply moral and, therefore, as part of a revolution to restore human subjectivity to the center of aesthetic experience—a theory and practice that are explicitly inscribed as part of a broader leftist worldview in their inception. (27)

Hoffman connects Frost's attention to voice with his attention to subjective individualism; the way his speakers talk about and represent things offers important insights into their own experiences and minds. This emphasis on sound and voice, then, carries within it a particularly moral view about poetry's purpose at the moment of modernity.

A survey of Frost's speakers suggests he was a poet drawn to vulnerable subjects, many of whom reflect feminine characteristics as female, aging, lonely, and/or wounded members of the community. And yet, while Frost's use of voice does represent an impulse toward democratic, individualistic ideals, a tension emerges between the objectives of his speakers and the objectives of Frost, the poet. Although the speakers frequently remain powerless and victimized within their circumstances—consider the doomed female speakers in "A Servant of Servants" or "The Hill Wife"—Frost, as poet, strives in representing them for aesthetic and artistic control. Hoffman identifies a similar tension. Just as he argues that Frost's theories on sound reflect the influence of William James and Henri Bergson, affirming the presence of pragmatism and radical empiricism

within Frost's poetics, he suggests that they also provide a means to popularize his writing:

Frost's theory of tone in poetry reflects not only a culturally coded empiricism but also an ethics of personal and political sovereignty. . . . In this way, Frost is able to propound his political belief in the dignity and value of the individual that flows from an appreciation of the 'rhythms of life at the centre of our minds' and, at the same time, secure the scientific backing that will help him achieve literary success. (44)

Underlying Frost's emphasis on individual consciousness is a desire for poetic authority and achievement, wherein Frost can "achieve literary success." The "sound of sense" becomes the means to communicate modern experience to both middle-brow and more professional critical audiences. In this way, Frost's theories of voice fit into a larger movement among American modernist poets to speak through American vocal rhythms. For Frost, voice serves two functions: to speak the individual experiences of his subjects and to advance the poet's broader aim of securing poetic authority.

Ultimately, Frost sought to be a poet solidly grounded in artistic control. As he writes a letter of October 26, 1930, to poet Kimball Flaccus:

You wish the world better than it is, more poetical. I wouldn't give a cent to see the world, the United States or even New York made better. I want them left just as they are for me to make poetical on paper. . . .I have no quarrel with the material. The grief will be simply if I can't transmute it into poems. . . . My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. (*SL* 289)

While Kimball wants to see objects as inherently poetical, Frost finds it the poet's task to make them so. He has no "quarrel with the material"; instead, his "anxiety" rests in how the poet uses such material to "make" himself. Voice, then, even from the mouths of Frost's speaking subjects, reflects larger claims about the poet's sense of self and the potential he finds in poetic creation.

The poem "The Generations of Men" demonstrates the anxiety over poetic authority inherent in Frost's ideas about voice. It also illustrates the speaking subject's potential to create elaborate versions of meaning that can be projected onto and through an actual object encountered in the landscape—in this case, an old cellar hole (itself a man-made object)—but also one that Frost can transform into a thing carrying multiple meanings for his speakers. In the poem, two descendents of the Stark family, a young man and woman, gather around the cellar hole following the governor's invitation for a family reunion. From the opening lines, Frost presents the setting in language that acknowledges shifting economic conditions: it is a "rock-strewn town where farming has fallen off/ And sprout-lands flourish where the axe has gone" (*NOB* 87). The land's natural resources have betrayed its residents: nature rebels against man's efforts to farm and shape it.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the intricacies of speech, and the poem's irregular blank verse, disrupt any clear poetic control. Patterns of sound dominate more than metrical variations, where sound repetitions yoke and carry meaning. Reflecting natural speech, the poet resists "poetical" juxtapositions of consonance or alliteration, but repeating sounds nevertheless create emphasis. The above quoted lines illustrate this technique,

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<sup>32</sup> The poem also reflects a particular anxiety about legacies of insanity running through families, when the young woman acknowledges that her ancestry runs through three separate branches of the Stark family. The man tells her, "D'you know a person so related to herself/ Is supposed to be mad," to which she responds, "I may be mad" (92). The caesura in the line, running together his point and her response, emphasizes the anxious uncertainties of ancestry—despite the poem's tone of flirtatious humor.

where the land's fallibility is emphasized with the "f" repetitions, and the hard "k" and "s" combination (of "rock-strewn" and "axe") emphasize the setting's very tensions. In fact, patterns of "s" sounds prove most dominant throughout the poem, corresponding to iambic rhythms by creating the heavier beat of vocal emphasis. The "Stark" family name also contains these hard sounds that propel the poem's vocal rhythm.

In addition presenting speech rhythms, the poem displays Frost's theories of the "sound of sense." In it, his speakers model the process by which meaning can be made out of the encountered object as it is transformed into a thing. As we will see, it is notably through voice that the male speaker ultimately claims authoritative control. As the man and woman sit with their legs over the cellar hole, they imagine different possibilities for the object's origin. First, the girl mythologizes the space, linking it to an Indian "myth of Chicamoztoc/ Which means The Seven Caves that We Came out of./ This is the pit from which we Starks were digged" (93). She imagines a center of origin that connects the family to the continent's native peoples; yet, she also re-imagines this origin myth as one of a people being shaped and "digged" by some other force—an idea corresponding to a poet crafting a poem. This originary space can only be accessed through the work (and craft) of the imagination.

The man looks at the object first through its literal meaning, responding, "What do I see?/ First let me look. I see raspberry vines—" However, the girl promptly transforms this literal reading into a metaphorical vision when she sees "a little, little boy,/ As pale and dim as a match flame in the sun;/ He's groping in the cellar after jam,/ He thinks it's dark and it's flooded with daylight" (94). Her image evokes Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where the individual cannot gain a sense of self because he lives in

mental darkness (despite the presence of a fire casting shadows upon a wall). Her vision is of an un-empowered individual, a vulnerable trapped child, unable to connect with surrounding objects because he cannot perceive them accurately. Significantly, Frost attributes this version of the family's legacy to the young woman, who describes the pale boy as feminine.

In contrast, the young man responds with a vision that re-imagines the family's origins through a powerful, vocal female force. He describes:

Listen. When I lean like this  
I can make out old Grandsir Stark distinctly,—  
With his pipe in his mouth and his brown jug—  
Bless you, it isn't Grandsir Stark, it's Granny,  
But the pipe's there and the smoking and the jug.  
She's after cider, the old girl, and thirsty. (94)

Although he traces the family's ancestry to a woman, she is nonetheless gendered as masculine in her habits and demeanor, so much so that he initially mistakes her for a man. She is a wild, rebellious spirit who interacts with the world through the force of her appetite; her experience of place and existence comes through the senses. Given that Granny represents a figure connected to bodily desires and pleasures, it is significant that the man summons her vision through an embodied voice: "the noise/ That the brook raises in the empty valley" (95). At this point, he presents a description of sound reminiscent of Frost's own claims about the pure meaning one can attain overhearing through a door:

We have seen visions—now consult the voices.  
Something I must have learned riding in trains  
When I was young. I used the roar  
To set the voices speaking out of it,  
Speaking or singing, and the band-music playing.  
Perhaps you have the art of what I mean.  
I've never listened in among the sounds

That a brook makes in such a wild descent.  
It ought to give a purer oracle. (95-96)

The authentic inspiration of sound has brought the voices into his head; the act of overhearing has produced pure meanings, as if they have been transmitted through an oracle. Although these sounds come from nature through the running brook, they inspire human voices. Yet, the young woman responds, “It’s as you throw a picture on a screen:/ The meaning of it is all out of you;/ The voices give you what you wish to hear.” Her idea of a “picture on a screen” corresponds to Plato’s shadows upon the wall. These pictures bring pre-existing meanings—they are the same shadows the enchained cave-dwellers accept as having always seen—while sound carries the potential for new meanings. Her characterization of the man’s story as “what you wish to hear” suggests that he is merely reinforcing ideas he already has of himself; his version of Granny represents some reflected picture of himself.

However, as the man begins to mimic Granny’s voice (eventually taking on an imagined dialect when the girl reminds him that his oracle would speak from a certain classed position), he presents a different vision of voice’s potential. The voice says,

Call her Nausicaa, and take a timber  
That you shall find lies in the cellar charred  
Among the raspberries, and hew and shape it  
For a door-sill or other corner piece  
In a new cottage on the ancient spot. (98)

Just as Nausicaa assisted a stranded Odysseus, helping him obtain the ships that would take him home, Granny informs the isolated listeners how to reconnect to home and ancestry; she instructs the girl to shape a new home from the burnt wood. Yet, timber also evokes its homophone “timbre,” the quality of sound a given instrument produces. In that sense, the quality of the voice can influence the wood’s reshaping. Granny continues,

“You take the timber—/ It’s as sound as the day when it was cut—And begin over” (100). The story suggests that voice can rebuild the house, both literally and metaphorically, given the poem’s presentation of the burgeoning romance between the Stark descendents. Through the woman’s characterization of picture images and the man’s characterization of voice, Frost presents an argument about how meaning can be reflected and renewed through the thing. Again, he genders female the self-reflective version that focuses on vulnerabilities of self, while he genders male the more empowered version that emphasizes creative potential. Throughout, he makes a larger claim about how voice can shape a speaker’s surrounding material and thus “[transmute] it into poems.” Language can both acknowledge an object’s history and build something new. The Stark family serves as a metaphor for poetic identity, here represented as identity linked to a particular landscape, nation, and history.

### **Labor and its Implications for the Poetic Self**

At the turn of the century, Industrial forms of labor threatened to alienate workers from the objects of their labor, while technologies threatened to reduce the individual to a mechanized function. In poems such as “Out, Out—” and “The Self-Seeker,” machines become prominent things inflicting harm upon the body, killing or maiming the poem’s workers and suggesting the subject’s vulnerabilities to modern technology. Yet, Frost sets even these poems in rural communities rather than Industrial, urban settings.<sup>33</sup> His attention to the people “north of Boston” can be read as a nostalgic desire to focus on pre-Industrial economies and a time when manual labor offered the potential to achieve

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, Frost composed at least two poems between 1905 and 1907 presenting sympathetic depictions of New England mill workers enduring harsh conditions, although these remained unpublished during Frost’s lifetime. As Hoffman points out, such poems represent “Frost’s early antagonism to industrial capitalism and the injustices of that economic system” (26).

selfhood through creative output. Nature becomes the most ideal place through which to chart this type of labor, for it represents a realm man can tame with his own hand. Indeed, Frost often focuses on farmers or farm laborers who are working the land for their own purposes. Frost's un-modern landscapes suggest a larger aim to present labor as a dignifying force granting the laborer autonomy and control. However, Frost's attention to labor is often a metaphor for the poetic labor that makes the poem; in exploring the conditions of rural laborers, Frost exposes preoccupations inherent in his own creative work.

Poems such as "Mowing" and "The Code" support such a reading, in which labor regulates codes of behavior and, more important, provides a clear structure through which the subject can gain authority and control. In "The Code," the speaker claims pride and accomplishment in his labor, forging an identity so empowered that he can bury his boss in hay for attempting to do his job. When the boss participates in rolling the hay to "get more work/ Out of his hired help," he violates an unspoken code: he has suggested the worker is not a "man." The speaker explains, "Never you say a thing like that to a man,/ Not if he values what he is" (*NOB* 84). Earlier, he tells his listener, "The hand that knows his business won't be told/ To do work better or faster—those two things" (81). A man *is* a man through his labor and the sense of pride he takes in his work. To this end, despite being buried in his own hay, the farmer does not fire the worker, because "He knew I did just right" (86). The moral of the farmhand's story suggests that the value of one's labor overpowers even economic hierarchies that position a hired laborer beneath his boss.

Yet, a closer reading of the poem reveals anxieties within this idealized depiction of labor. For Frost labor always poses a threat to selfhood, largely because—as we have

seen in Frost's creative labor of crafting poems—labor *is* the very means through which one asserts gains an authoritative self. In "The Code," the focus has turned less to the object of that labor—the thing that results—to the fact of the labor itself. This preoccupation with establishing creative authority becomes an effort to recast vulnerabilities as strengths. In fact, this speaker has launched his story because the "town-bred farmer" to whom he is talking has offended his workers by telling them to "take pains . . . to cock the hay . . . because it's going to shower" (80-81). The farmer's comment has so offended one helper that he has suddenly "[thrust his] pitchfork in the ground,/ Marched himself off the field and home" (80). For all the confidence of this speaker's voice and the bravado of his story, his impulse to tell this story reveals insecurities about class and labor: The presumably more educated and socially-mobile farmer from town threatens to invalidate his sense of self by not recognizing the man's pride in his work.

Labor becomes the act through which these rural workers can resolve insecurities about class, as well as masculinity. In the story, the speaker becomes enraged after the boss takes the harder job in rolling the hay, sending the farmhand to the top of the barn: "You understand that meant the easy job/ For the man up on top of throwing *down* / The hay and rolling it off wholesale,/ Where on a mow it would have been slow lifting" (83). The boss's ultimate offense is when he tells his worker, "Let her come." The speaker recounts, "I asked out loud, so's there'd be no mistake,/ 'Did you say, Let her come?' 'Yes, let her come.'/ He said it over, but he said it softer" (84). The boss has threatened the worker's very sense of masculinity in his implications that the farmhand is not good enough or fast enough at rolling hay. Yet, this moment must also be read metaphorically,

where it connects the worker's inadequate labor to impotent sexual performance. This insecurity proves too damaging to the worker's sense of self. He retaliates by emasculating the boss to the point that the rescuing workers have to "keep his wife/ Out of the barn." The speaker's story serves to reinstate a competitive masculinity where he—as in his physical positioning inside the barn—can come out on top, despite real anxieties underlying his actions.

By focusing on labor, Frost presents an argument about the kind of labor that can make things. As he states in the final lines of "Mowing," "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows./ My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make" (*PRF* 17). What results from successful labor is the "fact" of an idealized thing that can be perfected precisely because it is made; for Frost, making poetic things (in the Brownian sense) remains the goal, although the creative labor proves a complicated process. In many of the early poems, Frost presents the things that result from labor as important markers of the subject—things with the potential to stabilize identity. This relationship between the laborer and his made thing proves consistent with the one I have been identifying between Frost's poet-figure and his poems: the poem itself provides a space to gain authority and control, to present the "sweetest dream that labor knows." The resulting thing—the poem—allows Frost to assert and stabilize a poetic self. In short, then, Frost's attention to labor can be read as another means of addressing the thing's construction, with Frost revealing certain preoccupations inherent in the poet's creative act.

The made things of Frost's rural laborers are often simple objects, but ones that nonetheless reveal the laborer's vulnerabilities. Just as the men of "The Code" are rolling

hay, the dying farm laborer, Silas, in “The Death of the Hired Man” claims pride in his ability to “build a load of hay” (19). The farmer, Warren, acknowledges,

“I know, that’s Silas’ one accomplishment.  
He bundles every forkful in its place,  
And tags and numbers it for future reference,  
So he can find and easily dislodge it  
In the unloading. Silas does that well.  
He takes it out in bunches like big birds’ nests.  
You never see him standing on the hay  
He’s trying to lift, straining to lift himself.” (19)

Silas takes meticulous care in the thing he produces, carrying it carefully in piles “like big birds’ nests.” His labor produces something delicate and individual, a thing he creates with his own hands, taking pains not to disrupt the hay, in order to “lift himself” in the process. Even the mundane physical task of rolling hay becomes a creative, regenerative act, since, as the metaphor reminds us, nests are built for laying eggs. The poem puts Silas’s labor in direct conflict with that of Harold Wilson, an educated young man with whom Silas worked on the farm four years prior. Even as he lies dying, Silas is troubled by his recollections of Harold, who is now “finished school, and teaching in his college” (17). Mary recalls,

“Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.  
You wouldn’t think they would. How some things linger!  
Harold’s young college boy’s assurance piqued him.  
After so many years he still keeps finding  
Good arguments he sees he might have used.” (18)

While Harold is “associated in [Silas’s] mind with Latin,” Silas remains disappointed that he could not teach Harold how to build a load of hay, or convince him that academic experience is not the only means toward authority and knowledge. Harold represents a subject defined through classical education and knowledge handed down from sanctioned “masters.” Silas wants to educate him in another kind of experience that comes through

tangible creation and physical work. This conflict haunts Silas “like a dream,” in the depths of his unconscious. In fact, the Silas/Harold conflict also reflects a conflict within Frost. His own biography, up to a certain age, sounds quite similar to that of Harold, in that Frost attended college (however briefly) and returned to Massachusetts to teach. Yet, Frost resisted academic notions of education, even his poetic education, as his spotty college record (as well as his above-quoted letters to William and Susan Hayes Ward) suggests. Instead, Frost’s claims for poetic authority correspond with Silas’s notion of creation.

Through Mary’s empathetic dialogue and perspective, Frost suggests sympathies with Silas; yet, Warren’s viewpoint challenges a simple reading of Frost’s position on creative labor. The poem’s form as a dialogue between Mary and Warren fosters tension, as the poem rhetorically positions Silas as an object being analyzed for his value. While Warren contemplates him for his use-value as a hired hand—with the aging and infirm Silas inevitably falling short—Mary defends him as possessing some other, unarticulated value. Her compassion encapsulates a feminized point of view, reflecting a nurturing voice of empathy that opposes Warren’s capitalistic bottom line. He ultimately utters the poem’s last word—“‘Dead,’ was all he answered” (23)—suggesting that Warren is concerned only with the material facts: where and when Silas will die, and whether he can perform any work as a farmhand.

At times, the poem seems to invite the reader to identify with Mary’s point of view, opening with her sitting “musing on the lamp-flame at the table” (14) and ending with her sitting and gazing up at the clouds, “making a dim row,/ The moon, the little silver cloud, and she” (23). When Warren mocks the idea that Silas has returned “home,”

telling Mary, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in” (20), she responds, “I should have called it/ Something you somehow haven’t to deserve” (21). She affirms Silas’s right to die in this place, although her response is ambiguous and hesitant, framed in the negative. She cannot state what it is that makes one deserve a sense of home; nevertheless, she knows that Silas has greater value as a human being than that which can be measured economically. Through Mary, Frost feminizes Silas’s form of labor—labor that produces the creative thing—which he has pursued in his own poetic labor. Again, these anxieties of labor intersect with anxieties of masculinity. Despite, on the one hand, Frost’s support of Silas’s creative work, the poem enacts underlying anxieties about the worth of such labor: Can creative labor fit within society’s required masculine codes of behavior? Is the created thing valuable only if it can garner material worth? Is Silas a “man” in the end? The poem does not reach a resolution to these questions, but the dialogue between the husband and wife makes these preoccupations transparent, and in a gender-coded form.

In another poem, “After Apple-Picking,” Frost argues for the value of creative labor, while nevertheless underscoring the tensions it produces regarding the result of one’s labor. The objects of this poem, the apples, convey the speaker’s preoccupation with his own creative act precisely because they carry so many meanings as things—literal, symbolic, and metaphorical; in a real sense, this speaker cannot assert authority over the thing. On the literal level, the speaker is tired from the work of harvesting apples, a common enough task for an apple farmer. As symbols, the apples evoke Biblical aspirations of knowledge, making the speaker a man haunted by the very knowledge he so desires. I am most interested in the third metaphorical level: the way the

apples function as metaphor, as the products of the speaker's labor but also as things reflecting the poet's preoccupation about his role in the creative process. Exhausted after a full day picking apples, the speaker falls into a disturbed sleep:

But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,  
And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.  
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
The rumbling sound  
Of load on load of apples coming in.  
For I have had too much  
of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired. (77-78)

Like the dream that troubles Silas, this speaker's dream reflects disappointment about his role in apple picking, an act that can be read as a metaphor for poetic labor and creation.<sup>34</sup>

The apples in the dream are magnified and bruised; they become markers of the anxiety that has gone into producing them. They are, in fact, over-sensualized things that have required too much toil, touch, care, and smell. The speaker is also conscious of their physical toll in his aching feet pressed upon a ladder that shifts among the swaying branches. The ladder image evokes the ladder in "Birches," where the speaker imagines climbing the bent branches toward heaven. Here, even as the speaker's "long two-pointed

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<sup>34</sup> Poirier also focuses on the implications of labor in poems such as "Mowing" and "After Apple-Picking," drawing a connection between the satisfaction of physical labor and the satisfaction of poetic labor—as well as a third dimension of the satisfaction that comes through the "labor" of close reading ("the work of knowing") (288-289). He describes, "it is 'labor,' not any meditation afterwards, that 'knows.' . . . And what 'labor' knows is no *a* fact but *the* fact." Priscilla Paton extends Poirier's point to consider "how and why . . . the union of fact, dream, and labor lead to such revelation" (44). She concludes, "Labor and metaphor and faith in their value bring the poet into an intimate relation with the earth—a relation practical and loving, therefore true and necessary to life itself" (55).

ladder's sticking through a tree/ Toward heaven still" (77), this ladder is weighted down with emotion. This speaker is tired of the very thing he has worked to produce.<sup>35</sup>

The poem presents the speaker's growing awareness of his exhaustion as a turn that has resulted from altered perspective: "I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight/ I got from looking through a pane of glass/ I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough/ And held against the world of hoary grass" (77). The broken glass floating in the drinking trough, when picked up and looked through, tints the grass "hoary," a gray-white color hiding the grass's green. (The connection through the end-rhymes of "glass" and "grass" emphasizes this link.) The glass alters the speaker's perspective, removing color from the scene; an artist unable to see in color is one drained of creative connection to the world. (In "Birches," we also saw glass as a vehicle altering perspective.) This very artistic alienation is what haunts his sleep as "It melted, and I let it fall and break." When he notes that he was "well/ Upon my way to sleep before it fell," the line's enjambment emphasizes a double meaning of "well": in the context of the sentence, the term is an adverb measuring the speaker's relation to sleep when the glass shattered. Yet, the word also invokes the speaker's "wellness," prompting a careful reader to consider his mental condition at this moment in the poem. The shattered glass suggests a broken mirror, with the speaker now considering disturbed and repressed qualities that result from creative labor. He notes, "There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,/ Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall" (78). Too much has been expected of him.

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<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the textual history of "After Apple-Picking" and "Birches" becomes significant: Although these poems were composed during the same period, Frost withholds "Birches" until *Mountain Interval*, a collection in which he begins to more assertively transform anxieties into poetic creation. Likewise, "Birches" rewrites the anxieties of "After Apple-Picking" by emphasizing the potential of poetic authority to reshape the self. In his *Selected Poems* of 1923, Frost juxtaposes the poems, with "After Apple-Picking" and "Birches" opening the fourth section, again suggesting that Frost recognized a connection between the two poems.

Frost uses the poem's form to underscore this tension between poetic labor and anxious exhaustion about the creative process. Formally, the poem presents repeating rhymes, although the rhyme scheme is highly irregular. At times, the coupled rhyme is broken by an interruption of two to seven lines. Although rhyme allows the poet to connect language and experience through the rhyming words, the moments of interruption underscore anxieties about such creative control. The rhymes often couple disturbed, un-resolvable moments of creative anxiety. One such example would be the lines, "It melted, and I let it fall and break" and "What form my dreaming was about to take," interrupted by three lines. The link between "break" and "take" suggests an important connection about the reason for the speaker's distorted dream. What falls in between these lines are the three rhyming lines, "But I was well/ Upon my way to sleep before it fell,/ And I could tell." Here, the words "well," "fell," and "tell" suggest an expectation of emotional "wellness" in order for one to "tell" the required narrative. Given that the speaker is already aware of his disturbed state of mind (he has already fallen from wellness), this concern about creative output becomes more heightened. The longest delay in the rhyme repetition is the line "Went surely to the cider-apple heap" and the final line, "Or just some human sleep," separated by seven lines. The rhyme pattern here connects an image of wasted apples to the speaker's need for sleep: the desire for unconscious escape results from a sense of failed labor that has tarnished the fruit so severely the apples can only be discarded. In the poem's final lines, the speaker reflects uncertainty as to whether "this sleep of mine" is "just some human sleep," or is instead like the long hibernation of a woodchuck. In fact, he says, "Were he not gone,/ The woodchuck could say" (79). By granting the woodchuck more authority to determine the

meaning and quality of his sleep, the speaker underscores his sense of creative uncertainty. While he can “describe its coming on,” he lacks the authoritative control to determine its condition. This is a speaker exhausted by his creative output and hesitant about his own authority as a poet figure.<sup>36</sup>

As Frost transitions from anxious self to poetic self, in the process committing himself to the construction of his poetic persona, one can chart object-focused poems in *Mountain Interval* that point the way toward resolving his preoccupations with poetic labor. One such poem is the sonnet “The Oven Bird,” in which he describes the bird as “a singer everyone has heard” (35) in language that evokes a poet-singer. This metaphorical bird-poet (phonetically similar to “bard”) asserts poetic control in its characterizations and judgments—he makes “the solid tree trunks sound again” and determines “that for flowers/ Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.” Yet, in the final lines, Frost reveals that such acts of poetic authority actually compensate for uncertainties underlying the creative process: “The bird would cease and be as other birds/ But that he knows in singing not to sing./ The question that he frames in all but words/ Is what to make of a diminished thing.” The bird cannot “sing” of himself, or at least aspects of himself that he acknowledges to be “diminished.” In fact, this very concept of the “diminished thing,” of life after the Biblical fall, corresponds to the self-projected thing—the external object that contains and refracts diminished qualities of the self. In “The Oven Bird,” the poet’s response to such personal preoccupations is a tightly-crafted sonnet. (Frost modifies the

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<sup>36</sup> “The Woodpile” is another poem in which we see anxieties over the product of a man’s labor. When the speaker comes across an abandoned pile of wood, “a cord of maple, cut and split/ And piled—and measured, four by four by eight” (*NOB* 141), he ponders the very echoes of labor left behind with no use. For despite the “labour of his axe,” the worker has left the wood “far from a useful fireplace” (142). Such an image raises questions for the speaker about labor without a practical function—even meticulous creative labor reminiscent of Silas’s piles of hay. These preoccupations would plague a poet questioning the use-value of his poems.

regular iambic pentameter only twice, but in two lines that include rhyming feminine endings, suggesting that even his disruption of the iambic form was highly crafted.) The poet transforms the diminished thing into a perfected poetic thing. In the process, he becomes the “singer everyone has heard,” who nonetheless explores these anxieties throughout his poems “in all but words.” Thus, Frost suggests that all his poems, and in particular the ones reflecting “poetical” transformations of the object world, contain ulterior anxieties, albeit repressed and refracted through the constructed thing. Such things allow him to project an authoritative voice of wisdom.

## Chapter Two: Marianne Moore's *Observations* and Imaginary Possession of the Thing

Marianne Moore's inclusion in a study examining the modernist fascination with objects may seem a natural fit, particularly given the title of her first collection, *Observations* (1924). Moore's reputation as a descriptive poet of precision was cultivated early and intensely, most notably by T.S. Eliot in his introduction to her *Selected Poems* (1935), the volume he conceived and edited to canonize Moore as "part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time" (12). Focusing specifically on Moore's attention to objects, Eliot cites her as a poet writing in the tradition of her contemporary Imagists. He highlights her practice of examining materials through their particular and minute details, crediting her "gift for detailed observation, for finding the exact words for some experience of the eye" (7). And while Eliot claims that "to those whose intellection moves more easily" the poems will reveal "emotional value," he acknowledges that the "moderately intellectual" may find Moore's object descriptions merely "intellectual exercises" (8). Here, Eliot establishes an opposition between emotion and intellect that, I will argue, Moore's work clearly engages. Eliot frames this dichotomy in a way that proves particularly relevant for a study of Moore. Even as he upholds the distinction between intellect and reason, he suggests that the two concepts are, in fact, connected. A reader can comprehend a work's "emotional value" only through application of the intellect, a tool aimed at acquiring knowledge and understanding. Eliot recognizes that a select few readers will achieve this privileged recognition; yet, it is the goal all readers should pursue (lest a poem remain a mere "intellectual exercise"). In this chapter I argue that Moore also desires a connection to the "emotional value" of the object, even as she pursues this end through intellectual means. Moore's very process of observation

involves employing intellect to acquire knowledge of the object, and, in that process, to recognize some larger value the object holds—value that ultimately exceeds the subject’s intellectual understanding of it. Thus, we find Moore complicating the opposition between intellect and emotion, and promoting a connection between them through the very application of her art’s aesthetic. As we will see, for Moore, both aspects are necessary for the subject’s engagement with the object.

In the case of Eliot, even as he acknowledges some connection between intellect and emotion, his descriptions of Moore’s poetics dwell less on the emotional dimensions of her object study and more on the intellectual precision of her details:

The detail has always its service to perform to the whole. The similes are there for use . . . . They make us see the object more clearly, though we may not understand immediately why our attention has been called to this object, and though we may not immediately grasp its association with a number of other objects. So . . . she succeeds at once in startling us into an unusual awareness of visual patterns, with something like the fascination of a high-powered microscope. (8)

In his very categorization of Moore’s poetry as “descriptive,” Eliot portrays the work as the result of intellect, a scientific exercise aimed at examining objects with authenticity and accuracy: poetry that, like a “high-powered microscope,” applies an intense lens to the object, revealing the otherwise imperceptible minutia of its nature and allowing the reader to “see [it] more clearly.” This type of clarity also allows the reader to make connections between seemingly disparate and diverse objects by revealing patterns that order and connect things. Eliot finds the focus of Moore’s object study to be the objects

themselves, and the relationships between them. He further suggests emotional and intellectual detachment when he claims the reader “may not understand immediately why our attention has been called to this object.” The reader, he acknowledges, may not recognize a clear reason as to why the particular object has engendered the subject’s interaction. Instead, Moore’s object study presents precise and impersonal description that obscures the human connection between subject and object.

Eliot succeeded in canonizing Moore as a particular kind of descriptive modernist working in the Imagist tradition of pared-down detail, reminiscent of H.D. and Ezra Pound. Andrew J. Kappel has summarized Eliot’s influence, calling his edition of Moore’s *Selected Poems* “an enormously important volume of her verse, generally considered the basis of her representation as a Modernist” (“Presenting Miss Moore” 129). As Kappel points out, Moore herself based all subsequent collections of her work on Eliot’s edition, beginning her 1951 *Collected Poems* and 1967 *Complete Poems* with a full reprinting of the 1935 *Selected Poems*. He claims, “[Eliot’s] editorial work constituted a brilliant act of criticism that has served as the basis of our present understanding of Moore’s poetry.” In presenting Moore’s work in *Selected Poems*, Eliot altered *Observations* in ways that helped solidify her descriptive reputation: he placed first in the collection nine new poems, composed between 1932 and 1934, that apply scientific precision in their object representations, including “The Jerboa,” “The Plumet Basilisk,” “The Frigate Pelican,” “The Buffalo,” and “Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain”<sup>37</sup>; and he rearranged selections from *Observations* to emphasize Moore’s object focus, foregrounding “The Fish,” “Poetry,” “Pedantic Literalist,” “Critics and

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<sup>37</sup> Moore did not publish any new poems between 1926 and 1931, dates that corresponded to her years as managing editor, and later editor-in-chief, for *The Dial*, from 1925 until the journal’s demise in 1929.

Connoisseurs,” “The Monkeys,” “Roses Only,” and “In the Days of Prismatic Colour.” In consenting to Eliot’s reordering of her work (and eschewing the largely chronological ordering of *Observations*), Moore participated in recasting herself as part of a modernist trend: “The emphasis at the heart of the impersonal Modernist poetic on ‘things’ mitigated against a self-expressive poetic, of course, as well as against the extension of such a poetic into a conception of one’s verse as one’s poetic autobiography” (136). According to Kappel, Moore adopted changes that would minimize traces of her personal history. While we can never know the motivations underlying her revisions, it is clear that Moore supported Eliot’s editorial changes, thanking him in an October 23, 1934, letter for helping to clarify her poetic project: “To be elucidated is a spur both as regards rectitude and abandon and I begin to find myself on a better level by being even in the Barrie Dear Brutus sense, *understood*” (*SLMM* 329). Her decision, even decades later, to retain Eliot’s ordering and presentation in her *Collected Poems* and *Complete Poems*—both volumes over which she exacted precise control, making many of her well-known excisions and omissions of poems—suggests the degree to which Moore credited Eliot with recognizing an essential aspect of her poetics. He “understood” her work in a way that others, to date, had not.<sup>38</sup>

Given this textual history that helps elucidate Moore’s self-conscious packaging as a particular kind of modernist, it is little wonder that critics for much of the twentieth century accepted her as a poet examining “things” through an objective, impersonal

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<sup>38</sup> This question of the work’s packaging and presentation was particularly significant for Moore in her early career. Her work was first collected in book form when H.D. and Bryher released a volume, *Poems* (1921), without her involvement or approval. In addition, Moore’s relentless revisions in later editions of her poems suggest her awareness of the power associated with crafting a poetic image and project.

lens.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, aspects of Moore's poetics support such a reading: her presentation of multiple vocal registers, effected through widespread use of quotations from a variety of non-literary sources, as well as her elevated, formal, and frequently Latinate vocabulary. These techniques distance the reader from an identifiable subject who stands in some relation to the object under consideration. And yet, this dissertation has been aimed at complicating the very idea of an "impersonal Modernist poetic on 'things,'" as Kappel describes it, and instead locates moments where the subject preserves in things more personal experiences of interaction. The object is not something merely to be described with precision and accuracy, but to be used for the creation of a new, separate "thing" whose meanings reveal something of the subject's experience in its formation. The terminology of thing theory is useful here for distinguishing between the physical object under study and the thing resulting from the poet's creative act. The same process of transformation I have been exploring in other modernist poets is evident in Moore's concept of "observation," which ultimately *is* the process by which Moore looks at objects and makes them things. If Imagist poetry was aimed at "trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective," as Pound describes it in "Vorticism" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 89), we might say that Moore's observations record the precise moment when the subject

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<sup>39</sup> This began to change in the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of feminist readings of Moore's work by such critics such as Suzanne Juhasz, Bonnie Costello, and Taffy Martin, who read more subversive and complex impulses in Moore's poetics of looking. More recent Moore scholars have also examined ways in which Eliot's prominent interpretation has obscured our understanding of Moore's work. For example, Kappel exposes how Eliot's ordering conceals shifts in Moore's formal technique from syllabic verse to free verse and back to syllabic verse. Robin G. Schulze has proven integral in granting fuller access to Moore without the mediation of other poets or critics. In *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924* (2002), she presents a facsimile of the poet's early presentations of her work in literary journals and her first collection, *Observations* (1924). In this chapter I cite Schulze's edition when I include references to Moore's original *Observations*, because it is the most available means of accessing Moore's first book.

transforms a “thing inward and subjective” into a “thing outward,” a perfected exterior. As the subject looks at the object, she aims to gain its very possession through a process of subjective engagement, and, in turn, to preserve this act in the aesthetic achievement of the thing.

Moore complicates Brown’s notion of thing theory by often looking at objects that are already “things”—artistically-rendered objects. Her choice of objects in *Observations* illustrates her as a subject concerned with the artistic process itself and how things come to mean. Art objects abound throughout *Observations*: a fish transformed into a glass bottle; a seagull engraved in lapis lazuli; artifacts featured in museum displays; even natural objects, such as a chameleon or snail, that Moore portrays as artistic images embodying the polish and refinement of her poetics. By so prominently featuring constructed things, Moore elevates the artist as a figure of cultural power. Such attention echoes Frost’s exploration of rural objects that appear in domesticated versions: the woodpile, the stone wall, or the tree transformed into a telephone pole—things manifesting the labor that has reshaped wilderness into some other form. Yet, Moore’s objects are different from Frost’s in that she most often describes objects she found on display in the museums she frequently visited. Among the other poets in this study, Moore most resembles Robert Frost in her self-conscious attention to the poet’s function in creating things. It is clear that Moore, like Frost, sought mastery and authority over her material. Her hyper-constructed poems, employing traditional syllabic forms, rhyme, metaphor, and quotation, reveal her as a poet deeply conscious of the artifice of her medium. Both poets employ formal devices to gain authority over otherwise unregulated materials—the “momentary stay against confusion” Frost describes in “The Figure a

Poem Makes” (*CPRF* 132). Just as Frost’s poetic techniques prove the means by which he reveals his firm poetic hand (at times asserting a declarative voice of wisdom similar to the one we will see in Moore’s later version of “Poetry”), Moore also uses formal patterns to assert control over her materials. Like Frost, she often employs metaphor to transform the thing through a diverse range of discourses—applying the language of science, literary and Biblical tradition, philosophy, and history—to convey a polyphonic voice. In short, Moore’s multiple and varied forms of linguistic play become the means by which she demonstrates her possession of things. In Moore’s fascination with the created thing and the power inherent in the poetic imagination, her poetics proves consistent with ideas I have been employing from Bill Brown’s thing theory. For Moore, imaginary possession exposes objects—and, in particular, artistic objects—as capacious vessels of meaning. Unlike poets such as William Carlos Williams or George Oppen, whose poems (and prose, in the case of Williams’s *Spring and All*) reveal the messiness inherent in the object-thing transformation, Moore’s poems display the final thing through a carefully-constructed exterior that often obstructs access to the more personal preoccupations underlying its representation.

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that such things, the final products of the poetic act, frequently evidence the process of their own creation. Embedded within things, therefore, we can find evidence of the poet’s preoccupations with poetic voice and function. Critics reading Moore’s observations as exercises in descriptive precision overlook this aspect of her work. By examining her things to identify glimpses of the poet, we can understand more fully what Moore sought to achieve in her observations.

For early Moore, representing the thing comes through a performance of authority<sup>40</sup> she was still self-consciously negotiating. Even as the speaking subject—who I recognize as Moore herself—claims the authority to create polished things, acknowledging power inherent in the poetic act, she remains conscious that the poem must not be mere polish; it must connect the reader to “the genuine,” as she states in “Poetry.” As such, it must convey authentic experience. In these early poems, we see Moore illustrating how the subject can access “genuine” experience by, first, getting close to the object via minute and precise description and, simultaneously, employing formal techniques that will allow her to gain distance and control. If description is the means by which the poet gets close to the observed thing, Moore’s descriptions often have the simultaneous effect of distancing the reader from the material and the maker of such materials. Her use of quotation de-centers the narrative voice from a single speaker; her commitment to syllabic forms denaturalizes the syntax of the lines; and her use of scientific diction obscures the subject’s personal responses to the thing. Quotation, in fact, embodies this

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<sup>40</sup> In *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (1995), Cristanne Miller finds Moore engaging in questions of authority and power through the use of oppositional techniques that employ prevailing discourses of authority to reshape power structures from within. She concludes that Moore rejects traditional binary oppositions of between masculine/feminine, personal/ impersonal, and traditional/nontraditional (9). To this list, we can certainly add the binary of intellect and emotion I have been discussing. Miller’s attention to Moore’s “authority” provides an important precursor to my own study. She argues that Moore is engaged in “constructing a position of authority that is not inherited through the office of poet, does not stem from caste . . . , and does not depend upon the assertion of genius or other personal, exceptional abilities” (1). Instead, Moore asserts a different kind of authority, achieved through assertion, speculation, and questioning, that does not rely on binary notions of empowerment. She uses techniques that destabilize traditional ideas of “authority” by, for example, including quotations from a variety of highbrow and lowbrow sources to pluralize the poetic voice (179), and granting the reader significant authority to make meaning of the poem’s speech act (182). Thus, Moore reframes the very definition of authority. In my reading of Moore’s pursuit of authority, I am indebted to Miller’s work. Like Miller, when I use “authority,” I am referring to a matter of voice. I employ Miller’s concept of an oppositional sense of authority, wherein Moore practices traditional discourses even as she works to reform them. The poet maintained deference to traditional male models of authority, as she told Donald Hall in 1961, “I disliked the term ‘poetry’ for any but Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s or Dante’s. . . . What I write, as I have said before, could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it.” Yet, even as Moore acknowledges the authority of these canonical male poets, she positions her own poetics as taking up different aims. As we will see in Moore’s object fascination, she promotes a more feminine model of imaginary possession.

duality since the technique allows Moore to employ detailed description but nonetheless maintain subjective distance. Suzanne Juhasz similarly identifies in Moore's techniques the impulse to conceal personal aspects of the self:

The characteristic techniques of Moore's art—the verbal tactics that create a poem—can be seen as devices that in the process protect the self. The accumulation of observed detail leading to ethical generalization, the profusion of direct quotation, the self-effacing role of the speaker, the famous reticence, a desire to present without interpretation that is frequently exaggerated to the point of a blurring or confusion of point of view, the irony and wit, the subtle systems of prosody, the choice of subject and theme, even the procedure of revision and edition, all work towards this end. (42)

Ultimately, “imaginary possession” requires both closeness to the object and a sense of distance in its formation as an aesthetic thing. In this achievement, Moore removes any markers that would too clearly identify the speaker; the personal and subjective must be submerged and hidden. My own methodology of close reading involves mining Moore's things for glimpses of the subject. Through this process, we gain a picture of a subject who is more preoccupied with the efficacy of her aesthetic attempts than her polished exteriors might otherwise suggest.

In this chapter I focus on *Observations* because it grants access to Moore before she begins reshaping her poetic image and reputation. Moore published this, her first volume, without the editorial input of other contemporary modernists; thus, it captures her at a moment of autonomy in presenting her poetic project. The collection's very title

suggests the centrality of observation to her poetics, which is a process that, for Moore, requires the poet's agency and control. Observation is always more than a passive exercise in looking, or a form of reportage distinguished for its precision and detail. By studying *Observations* specifically through Moore's use of objects, we can better understand her concerns over how the poet gains possession of the thing. Her object descriptions frequently instruct the reader about how this process takes place.

One poem proves particularly instructive for outlining Moore's poetic of things, because it describes—and in fact enacts—the particular process of imaginary possession through which Moore creates things: “When I Buy Pictures.” The poem presents a subject contemplating a set of images over which she desires possession. As we quickly see, possession here is not about material acquisition; the subject does not come to physically possess any of the images she describes. Instead, possession requires a different type of engagement—that of the imagination. Although it requires an act of authority and domination, perhaps similar to that associated with material possession, the poem calls for a type of interaction between subject and object that happens in the mind. This interaction does not yield an object one can purchase but a thing one can make. In “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore instructs her reader on this process, outlining a structure in which she gains possession of observed things. Further, she illustrates how a temporary experience can become permanent (and, in turn, material) through the aesthetic achievement of the poem. If the resulting poem provides the proof of the possession, then it must also provide the evidence of how such acquisition took place. As I have already suggested, description is the device by which Moore finds a way “in” to

the object and achieves a subjective connection; it is also the means by which she pulls back to achieve aesthetic polish. Both aspects prove integral to her process of possession.

Moore begins the poem by considering the very qualities that prompt her desire for these pictures. She tells us that when she “[buys] pictures,” she is engaged in a more complex act of observation:

Or what is closer to the truth,  
when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the  
imaginary possessor,  
I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average mo-  
ments:  
the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernible than  
the intensity of the mood;  
or quite the opposite— (Schulze 101)

Moore defines looking as the means by which she becomes an “imaginary possessor”<sup>41</sup>: by identifying qualities of the picture that would give her “pleasure in my average mo-  
/ments.” Whatever foolish or whimsical qualities might have prompted the subject’s curiosity need not be visible—at least any more so than the subject’s own intense feelings—and yet, these are the very aspects Moore suggests initiate desire. The impulse underlying the observation is subjective and individual. Further, it is everyday pleasure, rather than intellectual or objective critique, that propels the subject’s interest. Moore warns, “Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that,/ detracts from one’s enjoyment.” Pleasure need not preclude the presence of the intellect; for some, pleasure

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<sup>41</sup> We also may better understand Moore’s concept of imaginary possession by exploring it against Richard Poirier’s idea of “visionary possession” as a means by which American artists, working in a lineage of Emerson, take “possession” of the vast American landscape through the eye/I’s perception. Poirier’s concept suggests an American romanticism that allows the artist to reclaim and “[preserve] imaginatively those dreams about the continent that were systematically betrayed by the possession of it for economic and political aggrandizement” (*A World Elsewhere* 51). I mention the connection between visionary possession and imaginary possession because it underscores the stakes for Moore’s poetics in contributing to an American poetic tradition. Although Poirier’s concept cannot be mapped cleanly onto Moore’s work—and I do not mean to suggest here that Moore is, ultimately, a romantic poet—his observation that the artist reclaims the material world through its imaginary renewal is applicable to Moore’s object poems.

may involve “an intellectual emphasis” if that approach fosters the subject’s enjoyment. Yet, pleasure remains a largely sensuous experience that promotes gratification and delight. Implied here is a particular idea of the object’s aesthetics, which Moore suggests must be in some way “pleasing” to the subject; this accounts for Moore’s tendency to represent objects with refinement and polish, as well as her repeated fascination with artistic objects. All of the objects featured in “When I Buy Pictures” are common items transformed into art:

—the old thing, the medieval decorated  
hat-box,  
in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the  
waist of the hourglass  
and deer and birds and seated people;

The object, she claims, may be “no more than a square of parquetry”—a mosaic of wood flooring—or “an artichoke in six varieties of blue.” What distinguishes these every-day objects is their aesthetic transformation: the hat-box that invites pleasure because of its particularly decorative surface; the inlaid wood of the parquetry that boasts a unique geometric pattern; the artichoke whose dramatic color renders it something more than mere vegetable. Aesthetic fascination, Moore instructs us, prompts the subject’s desire to possess the object; it is also the quality that allows the poet to make objects into things, by illustrating them with aesthetic precision.

Beyond aesthetic value, the described objects also convey value to this speaker as things that evoke connections beyond the speaker’s own cultural moment. In the objects she examines, Moore illustrates how artistically-rendered things become timeless vehicles allowing the subject to connect across history. The medieval hat-box is an everyday historical object whose very ornamentation, with the hounds’ waists likened to

an hourglass, illustrates the rushing force of time; art, in contrast, stands to forge a connection between subject and object that transcends the limitations of time and history. Moore's description of "the snipe-legged hiero-/glyphic in three parts" (101), a reference to an Egyptian low relief at the Metropolitan Museum, provides another example of an object speaking from an early moment when human experience was translated into written form; the hieroglyphic grants access to a human voice speaking from the past. In other images, Moore focuses on intersections between object and language, as she describes "the literal/ biography perhaps,/ in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse." She presents here the image of life transformed in its presentation on the page; through language individual experience becomes broadly accessible. Elsewhere, she considers Biblical references to Adam represented through art. First, Moore identifies a picture of "the silver fence protecting Adam's grave," an allusion, she tells us in the Notes to *Observations*, to a silver fence Constantine erected to enclose Adam's grave; the image was described and photographed in a January 5, 1918, edition of *Literary Digest* (Schulze 140). In addition, Moore describes a drawing by William Blake of "Adam and Eve taken by Michael out of Eden." Both pictures draw attention to Adam's mortality following his expulsion from Eden and provide examples of men—Constantine and Blake—transforming the creation myth depicted in Genesis into some tangible form. If the speaker's goal has been to locate objects granting access to human experience that predated her own, Moore depicts artists and art objects illustrating this process. Thus, the poem suggests that the object's transformation into art allows it to transcend history and fosters a human connection between subject and object.

The subject gains possession when he or she can take pleasure in the aesthetic representation of that experience.

There is a second aspect to imaginary possession beyond the subject's connection and closeness to the object. Imaginary possession not only celebrates the object as something the subject can connect with, but also allows the poet to participate in its representation as a thing. Once the poet gains imaginary access, she pursues the appropriate formal means of transforming the object into an aesthetic thing. In the final lines of "When I Buy Pictures," Moore reminds the reader what such an achievement must convey. She claims, "It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,/ it must be 'lit with piercing glances into the life of things';/ it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it" (Schulze 101). It proves significant that Moore delivers this information via a quotation, which she credits to A.R. Gordon's book of Hebrew translations, *The Poets of the Old Testament*. At this crucial moment, she relinquishes the voice to that of a prophetic Biblical poet, again emphasizing the timeless authority inherent in the poetic act. In her own poetic achievements, she strives for the same authoritative voice. The discussion of objects in this passage shifts from specific objects to a vague repetition of "it." The speaker is now considering the stakes for all artistically-achieved things. She claims that the artist's rendering must provide "piercing glances" into the object's very life; it must grant access to the "spiritual forces"—spiritual or moral qualities—that were valued in its creation: in other words, the very qualities that make it transcendent. Such spiritual forces exist in contrast to bodily or corporeal aspects, those that would limit the object to its physical outline or the material details of the artist's existence. It is not mere description that matters here, but some larger "spiritual" quality that will allow for

timeless connection. Moore's use of quotation here proves significant, as she removes the claim from any particular author and instead presents it as universal prophecy.

Nevertheless, the very idea of "spirituality" as inherent in Moore's things remains problematic; the introduction of spirituality at the poem's close requires us to reconsider the particular qualities this speaker has valued in her creations.

The final lines of the poem stage an abrupt shift into abstraction, particularly following the details the speaker has previously listed. Yet, looking at the poem again, we see that abstraction marked the speaker's experience from the opening lines in Moore's repetition of vague pronouns to describe the speaker's process of getting close to the thing ("when I look at *that* of *which* I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor," emphasis added). Moore's linguistic abstraction regarding the objects that give her pleasure ("I fix upon *what* would give me pleasure") suggests her resistance to claim any particular "spiritual force" that initiates the speaker's possession. Instead, Moore's "spirituality" is, ultimately, about an aesthetic experience of the object; it is a spirituality emptied of its spirit and instead addressing the form's representation. As we have already seen, this speaker is interested in objects that invite pleasure through their ornate decoration. And while the "makers" of the pictures include a variety of artists dating back to ancient Egypt, what makes these objects transcendent even centuries after their creation is their capacity to invoke the viewer's imagination; such qualities frequently come through their particular aesthetic details. The viewer can imagine the human elements, whether it is the "literal biography" or the hand that guides Adam from Eden, and thus can sense the "genuine" within these well-crafted aesthetic exteriors. Through the process of description, Moore achieves a sense of connection to the object, which is

essential for imaginary possession to take place. Yet, description is also the means by which she can more objectively represent the thing to foster a connection that will extend beyond the observing subject.

Thus far, I have argued that “When I Buy Pictures” serves as a statement of Moore’s poetics on how she can claim imaginary possession of objects. Yet, this focus on the subject’s connection to the object through pleasure is something Moore addresses even outside of *Observations*. In her 1934 review of William Carlos Williams’s *Collected Poems, 1921-1931*, she recognizes emotional dimensions as central to observation. There, she says of Williams’s object illustrations:

The poem often is about nothing that we wish to give our attention to, but if it is something he wishes our attention for, what is urgent for him becomes urgent for us. His uncompromising conscientiousness sometimes seems misplaced; he is at times almost insultingly specific, but there is in him—and this must be our consolation—that dissatisfied expanding energy, the emotion, the ergo of the medieval dialectician, the “therefore” which is the distinguishing mark of the artist. (“Things Others Never Notice” 327)

Moore’s analysis of Williams is reminiscent of Eliot’s comments on her own work in his Introduction to *Selected Poems*. Yet, while Eliot acknowledges that the reader may never recognize the poet’s purpose in looking at a given object, Moore credits Williams’s descriptions with revealing the “therefore” of the encounter, so that what is “urgent for him becomes urgent for us.” For Moore the “service” of the given detail is that it prompts in the reader a particular connection, without which the poem would remain mere

description. While the speaker's neutral tone may convey a sense of emotional distancing and control—the voice of authority Moore strives toward in her own poetic—the object representations contain more complexity. Examining the thing can reveal glimpses of what propelled the subject's observations, the emotional urgency. It is useful here to consider the relationship between “emotion” and “pleasure,” for although these concepts are not synonymous, Moore does seem to suggest that both can be pathways for imaginary possession. In her discussion of Williams's poetry, Moore suggests that his object representations, in all their minute detail, grant insight into the poet's emotional experience, which helps explain the urgency of the observation. Locating Williams's “dissatisfied expanding energy” allows the reader to connect to something human in the poet's representation. Such a step is necessary for both the poet's imaginary possession of the object and the reader's imaginary possession of the resulting thing. Thus, we find in Moore's review further evidence of the goals she pursued in her poetic of things.

Moore is aware of the power relations at stake in the relationship between subject and object, observer and observed. She stages questions over authority and power in the poem “Those Various Scalpels,” in which she examines the concept of imaginary possession through the metaphor of dissection, suggesting that, like a surgeon, the observing speaker must execute the act with a skilled poetic hand. In this poem, Moore represents possession as an act of cultural power; therefore, the act carries certain responsibilities. Moore warns against ruthless possession—a form of dissection that would coldly scrutinize the object's components, piece by piece—instead encouraging the subject's connection to the object under examination. As in “When I Buy Pictures,”

Moore advocates a model of imaginary possession that moves away from the traditional model of acquisition and domination.<sup>42</sup>

The poem stages its own dissection as Moore presents a biologist whose overzealous techniques threaten “destiny/ itself” (104). Moore describes this woman with hair like “the tails of two/ fighting-cocks head to head in stone—like sculptured scimitars”; cheeks that are “rosettes/ of blood on the stone floors of French châteaux”; and a hand like “a bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from/ Persia” (103). She uses metaphor and simile to evoke imagery of swords and weaponry, in particular, highly-ornamented Persian weaponry associated with the earliest civilizations, thus placing this biologist/poet in a certain lineage of warfare and cultural possession. Moore characterizes the poem’s subject as an agent of war, a Western figure engaging in ruthless acts of cultural superiority in her destruction and suppression of the Eastern body (a body that the poem, in fact, does not examine). “Are they weapons or scalpels?” (104), the speaker asks, casting the instruments as aggressive tools of destruction rather than objective instruments of science. The poem is highly conscious that the act of observation represents an assertion of cultural power. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux also identifies in Moore such an awareness of observation; in fact, Loizeaux claims, Moore recognizes its dual nature. On the one hand, observation can represent a moral act: “Looking carefully, steadily, particularly was, for Moore, a way of practicing justice. Moral scrupulosity required disciplined observation” (82). Yet, Moore identifies other potentially “dark aspect[s]” that could accompany this process (83). According to Loizeaux, “She knew the

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<sup>42</sup> In this sense, “Those Various Scalpels” illustrates the oppositional sense of authority Cristanne Miller identifies in *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority*, by presenting a typically masculine model of authority (albeit represented through the female figure of the biologist) and questioning its outcomes in its dissection of objects.

relation of viewer to viewed could be one of power and the desire to dominate, and she understood that desire to be coded male. She also knew that women, too, could be predatory, inquisitive, and voracious, and that men were not so inevitably.” Thus, the cultural authority inherent in observation carries the potential for both positive and negative outcomes, which cannot always be predicted through tradition binaries of gender. In this poem, the voracious scientist is herself a woman who has adopted a particularly masculine model of authority; thus, Moore complicates any simple opposition or concept of authority one might assign according to gender. Instead, in the poem’s critique of one form of domination, it promotes a different kind of observation that encourages the subject’s connection to the object under dissection.

Moore recognizes both the necessity and the risk of employing artificial means for presenting her material and, in turn, asserting a voice of authority that remains a performance. Even as the poem celebrates its own ornate visual imagery, its final lines warn against “dissecting destiny”—or examining personal or cultural history—with tools more specialized and artificial than the objects themselves. The poem extends a tension evident elsewhere in *Observations*, as Moore simultaneously employs and questions the artificiality of the imagination. She concludes by arguing for the need to expose real things (the actual “tissues of destiny”)—even as her own act of observation has avoided any such attempt. Instead, the poem celebrates its ornamentation and its status as a highly-constructed linguistic exercise. From the first line, Moore presents the poem as the product of an authoritative poetic hand, using such devices as internal rhyme, alliteration, and consonance, as well as explicit discussion of the instruments’ sound, to announce the particular tension the poem will address: “Those/ various sounds consistently indistinct,

like intermingled/ echoes/ struck from thin glasses successively at random” (Schulze 103). And yet, Moore’s linguistic control over these lines proves that her dissecting instruments are anything but random; they are the tools of a skilled master. Later, the poem lingers on the exquisite details of the instruments’ ornamentation, as well as the dress of the female figure exercising authority:

... —a collection of half a dozen little objects  
made fine  
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragon fly blue; a  
lemon, a  
pear  
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a  
magnificent square  
cathedral of uniform  
and at the same time, diverse appearance—a species of  
vertical vineyard rustling in the storm  
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or scalpels?  
Whetted

to  
brilliance by the hard majesty of that sophistication which  
is su-  
perior to opportunity, these things are rich  
instruments with which to experiment but surgery is  
not tentative. Why dissect destiny with instruments  
which  
are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny  
itself? (103-104)

These descriptions emphasize class implications to this form of superiority; it is a “sophistication which/ is su-/ perior to opportunity,” a product of wealth and privilege that further distances the subject from the materials over which she stands to dissect. This subject has not demonstrated any effort of imaginary possession that would allow for a mental connection to take place. This form of possession proves destructive, Moore warns, in part because the subject has been relying on artificial tools of dissection rather than a connection to the object. In her final lines, Moore draws attention to the

artificiality of her own act of dissection and thus invites the reader to consider the dangers of this type of possession. It must not become merely an aggressive act of cultural superiority, despite Moore's recognition that the assertion of the imagination is always an assertion of some form of cultural power.

I will now turn to a third poem, "Poetry," to establish Moore's ideas on imaginary possession and her poetic of things. This poem is significant as the one Moore would alter most dramatically in subsequent revisions of her work; her changes prove particularly relevant in that she removes from the poem the objects and retains only assertion.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the poem provides greater evidence of Moore's early poetic of things and her increasing shift toward an authoritative poetic hand. In its early presentation in *Observations*, "Poetry" presents a catalog of objects serving as poetic subjects to illustrate how poetry can communicate a "genuine" experience to the reader (Schulze 72). The things presented in "Poetry" reveal a poet working to negotiate two conflicting impulses: the need to capture the raw emotional force that marks the subject-object interaction—a form of imaginary possession that brings the subject closer to the object—and the need to refine such raw experience into a more polished and constructed form via authoritative distancing. The poem embodies the very tension between closeness and distance I have identified as inherent in Moore's process of imaginary possession. Thus, "Poetry" displays one of Moore's central concerns in *Observations*, as she overtly raises

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<sup>43</sup> Moore ultimately cuts this 29-line poem (from its early presentation in *Observations*) to a mere four lines in its final version in her *Complete Poems*:

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one dis-

covers in

it, after all, a place for the genuine. (36)

Andrew Kappel has said of these changes, "The only revisions in modern poetry more famous than Moore's revisions of 'Poetry' are Pound's and Eliot's revisions of *The Waste Land* manuscript" ("Complete with Omissions" 127).

questions about the poet's process of asserting meaning through artistically-rendered things.

First, Moore argues that poetry should provoke intense emotion that will promote the reader's connection. In the opening lines, she acknowledges an emotional reaction that is less than pleasurable, with the speaker admitting, "I too, dislike it: there are things that are important be-/ yond all this fiddle" (72). And yet, I have already discussed the connection between emotion and pleasure, suggesting that both allow Moore to identify a human response underlying the observation. In the case of "Poetry," the emotional response of "dislike" becomes the means by which the reader can pursue a connection to the material by approaching it with "contempt." I am reading "contempt" here as a form of intellectual scrutiny and critical distance one employs when they cannot immediately locate pleasure; in fact, one could argue Moore promotes such contempt in all her readers by making her poems so difficult to access. We are back, in a sense, to Eliot's claim that only readers who approach Moore's poems via the intellect will access their emotional value. In "Poetry," Moore makes a similar claim about the process that can bring the reader (and the poet) close to the poetic material. Her use of the word "things" is also worth considering, since it suggests an abstract concept of value that exists in excess of the "fiddle" one finds recorded in a poem. Much like Bill Brown's use of "thing" as encapsulating meanings and values in excess of the physical object, Moore employs the term here in a similar way, acknowledging meanings and values that prove important beyond the words recorded on the page (values that make the thing transcendent in a similar manner to the "spiritual forces" referenced in "When I Buy Pictures"). The

“fiddle” of the poems—the written materials, with the words themselves representing a type of object—stands to guide the reader to the very “things” that prove important.

In “Poetry,” Moore emphasizes importance and usefulness as qualities she strives toward in her object representations. She lists a range of objects that “are important not because a/ high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-/cause they are/ useful” (72). They are “useful” not for some intellectual purpose (the “high sounding interpretation”) but for what the reader can use them to do. Preceding these lines, Moore describes body parts that illustrate a human subject engaged in contact with an external object: “Hands that can grasp, eyes/ that can dilate, hair that can rise/ if it must.” Hands grasp external things, while pupils dilate and hair rises during moments of attraction or arousal. Moore provides here an image of a body engaging in tactile contact that induces pleasure; this image suggests a subject forging connection with an external thing. Art becomes useful when it can promote this type of connection, which is central to imaginary possession. It is less useful when description is used only as a form of mimesis, merely to copy the original object: “when they become so derivative as to become un-/ intelligible.” Moore continues, “the same thing may be said for all of us, that we/ do not admire what/ we cannot understand.” Readers can achieve genuine connection to the poem’s things—with the reader achieving his or her own form of imaginary possession—when that material proves pleasurable in some way.

As we have now seen in other object-focused poems in *Observations*, Moore’s choice of objects in “Poetry” illustrates a tension between closeness and distance. Moore presents a diverse array of non-human objects, suggesting even further the need to employ descriptions that can promote the reader’s connection to foreign things:

the bat,  
holding on upside down or in quest of something to  
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless  
wolf under  
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse  
that feels a flea, the base-  
ball fan, the statistician—  
nor is it valid  
to discriminate against “business documents and  
school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One  
must make a distinction  
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,  
the result is not poetry (72)

Although this list initially seems randomly selected and inherently distant from any particular subject, a closer examination reveals certain qualities that may be promoting the speaker’s connection. The descriptions share a commonality in that the speaker captures these “phenomena”—observable facts—in the pursuit of sensual pleasure. She preserves the animals in moments of determination as they respond to raw needs. They are tireless, wild, and bold and cannot be contained or domesticated. The image of the critic, in contrast, is the only one represented through discomfort, with skin twitching in apparent irritation; the image is reminiscent of the contempt Moore describes in the opening lines. The list then reveals the familiar tension in Moore’s work between experience embraced with a wild sense of freedom and pleasure, and experience regulated through critical judgment, or the mathematical precision of a baseball fan who can filter the player’s raw force into cold, objective statistics. Poetry must always negotiate these two extremes—the wild and the tamed—and, as Moore argues, it becomes “genuine” when it *both* captures “the raw material of poetry in/ all its rawness” and allows the poet to “present// for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in

them” (73). Poetry must allow for the poet’s precision and formal control (the “imaginary gardens” that can, in turn, be presented “for inspection” by others) but must also capture genuine experience and emotion (the “real toads”). Moore’s wild animals help us to understand her fascination with a raw and unregulated energy. And yet, the toads must be represented through precision to avoid being merely personal symbols of the poet’s experience. To be “real” is to be both a raw product of the poet’s imaginary possession and yet a thing distanced from any single possessor. Imaginary gardens must be pruned in preparation for the inevitable critical judgment of the readers invited to enter.

This latter idea of critical assessment relates to another aspect of imaginary possession: Moore’s desire to project an authoritative voice. “Poetry” helps to illustrate this point, as well, given the extreme revisions Moore makes to the poem in later versions. As Robert Rehder has pointed out, it is objects that Moore excises from the final poem: she removes the catalog of things through which a reader can seek connection. Instead, the poem becomes a declaration of what poetry can offer, without providing proof in its illustrations. The final version of “Poetry” presents a speaker who has become too distanced from the material; this poetic voice makes assertions she wants accepted at face value. The pursuit of authority only, without the counter-balancing drive for imaginary connection, proves to be one potentially dangerous outcome of the tensions on display in *Observations*.

In the remaining pages, I will discuss several object-focused poems in *Observations* by classifying them according to two categories. In the first, I will examine poems that represent Moore’s achievement of the aesthetic thing—poems that depict the final polished product of the poet’s object encounter and thus provide evidence of

imaginary possession. Yet, even within these perfected exteriors, I occasionally point to cracks in the exterior that reveal glimpses of the subject enacting the observation. The second category of poems include those in which Moore acknowledges more explicitly certain limitations inherent in the poetic act; these are poems in which we can gain greater access, or “piercing glances” of the subject who has encountered the object and remains preoccupied with the efficacy of her representations.

### **Moore’s Achieved Thing (and the Concealed Poetic Self)**

Moore’s pursuit of the perfected artistic thing provides a simultaneous opportunity to project an authoritative voice that can conceal the experiences of the encountering subject. Thus, we find the poet demonstrating techniques of distancing and authority. Her poems frequently present an objective, unidentifiable speaker that stands in some measure of distance from the object of observation. One poem embodying this vision of imaginary possession is “The Fish,” in which Moore employs sparse description to represent objects and to distance the speaking subject from the material. Moore’s support for the poem is evident in her elevation of it from the 33rd poem in *Observations* to the tenth in *Selected Poems*, where it also becomes the first *Observations* poem to follow Moore’s nine new compositions. The poem includes dynamic descriptions of the oceanic landscape (such as the mussel shell that opens and shuts “like// an/ injured fan”) without revealing any details of the speaker’s connection to it. These representations of things remain objectively precise and impersonal. Such details reveal a great deal about Moore’s ideals for her poetics. “The Fish” is notable for its abundance of both scientific and decorative details, which mark an intense observing gaze and a careful poetic hand that has crafted these details into a particular shape, evident in the poem’s specific

syllabic stanza forms. The poem affirms the permanence and scope of poetry—“this/ defiant edifice”—that serves as the receptacle for all experience. The ocean, an all-encompassing space absorbing life, destruction, mortality, and history, serves as a metaphor for poetry itself, a medium through which the poet can illustrate “All/ external/ marks of abuse” . . . “all the physical features of// ac-/ cident” (Schulze 86)—with this stanza and line break exposing the poem’s own physical features as anything but accidental (given the adherence to the patterned form). It is the poet that crafts “the stars,// pink/ rice grains, ink/ bespattered jelly-fish, crabs like/ green/ lilies and submarine/ toadstools” (85) and exercises authority in revealing “things [that] stand/ out on” (86) the poem’s structure. From the opening line, we learn that this landscape is actually one of art, another decorative canvas through which Moore can project a voice of authority. When the poem announces that the fish “Wade/ through black jade” (85), we know we are in an artistic space, in which the dark ornamental stone becomes a backdrop on which Moore can carve her elaborate scene.

Moore makes an ambitious gesture of authority in the final stanza as she reaches toward a larger declaration about human experience:

. . . .; the chasm side is  
 dead.  
 Repeated  
 evidence has proved that it can  
 live  
 on what cannot revive  
 its youth. The sea grows old in it. (86)

Here, we see both the poet’s intent to capture authority and her recognition that this goal can only be achieved through art. As the speaker strives toward total possession of the space, pushing beyond the perspective of a single subject observing objects’ minute

details, a rupture takes place: the poem plunges into a chasm, describing a fissure in the earth's surface that breaches the very structure the speaker is gazing upon. Although the speaker tells us this cleft can hold no certain knowledge (or even, possibly, life), she nonetheless uses this particular vessel—a gap—to assert her claim about mortality and the long-standing permanence of art. When access to real objects becomes limited or removed, the poet responds via imaginary possession. The void itself becomes the thing encapsulating Moore's desire for her own poetics: to create lasting structures through which art can "live," independent of the experience of any single creator. In the ambiguity of the final lines, we find that the poet can project authority only through distance and detachment from the objects. Here, the speaker has achieved total possession of and distance from the thing. The problem, however, is that in achieving this form of possession, Moore has also removed the material to a point of abstraction, evident in the near incomprehensibility of the antecedent to "it" in the above passage. There is no clear way to read just *what* "can/ live/ on what cannot revive/its youth" or how we should resolve the paradox that something has repeatedly been proven to live on a dead structure. By moving toward an authoritative stance of distance, this speaker has shifted the reader's experience from one of pleasure to, now, one of contempt; the reader must approach the material with scrutiny and intellectual rigor to access the thing's meaning.

Another poem reflecting Moore's ideal aesthetic achievement is "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish." Focused explicitly on an art object, this poem allows Moore to showcase the ideal artistic thing without any consideration of the subject. The bottle represents an object transformed and perfected through its artistic representation. In her corresponding depiction of the phenomenon—an artistic

representation Moore has transformed again in the space of the poem—she avoids acknowledging any preoccupations or experiences that may have accompanied the speaker’s process of imaginary possession:

Here we have thirst  
And patience from the first,  
And art, as in a wave held up for us to see  
In its essential perpendicularity;  
  
Not brittle but  
Intense—the spectrum, that  
Spectacular and nimble animal the fish,  
Whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword with their polish.  
(Schulze 62)

Unlike its actual counterpart, the glass bottle, held upright at this angle of perpendicularity provides the opportunity for scrutiny. Intense exposure reveals particular qualities: the object’s multi-colored brilliance, its impression of agility and speed, its scales like a layer of armor protecting against the sun’s glare.<sup>44</sup> In Moore’s transformation, she represents the fish’s nature as one of defensive power. In this way, the bottle proves reminiscent of the independent, self-protective rose we find in “Roses Only” that guards its internal nature from an observer’s potentially violent possession. The word “polish” in the final line affirms the constructed and refined nature of this

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<sup>44</sup> I am not the first critic to recognize Moore’s frequent attention to objects with layers of protective armor. In his well-known essay, “Her Shield,” Randall Jarrell notes Moore’s tendency to focus on plants and animals with elaborate defensive armor, although he also reads this interest in her frequent use of quotation and revision, as well as the difficulty, irony, and concision of her poetry: “Some of the changes in Miss Moore’s work can be considered in terms of Armour. Queer terms, you say? They are hers, not mine: a good deal of her poetry is specifically (and changingly) about armour, weapons, protection, places to hide; and she is not only conscious that this is so, but after a while writes poems about the fact that it is so” (199). In *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker links Moore’s depictions of armor to her need to protect gendered aspects of her own identity: “Moore’s proliferating bestiary of creatures in protective armor and camouflage are not only personal self-portraits in code, as many critics have observed. They imply over and over the necessary timidities and disguises of a brilliant woman in a world where literary authority is male” (52). Taffy Martin also identifies a group of Moore’s poems “whose subject is defensive armoring but whose speaker is as fearless a warrior as that of her own mythic dream, the dragon” (3). All of these critics acknowledge Moore’s desire to mark a clear distinction between her own biography and the material of her poems, as well as to allow for more complex meanings to emerge in the work.

exterior, as does the deceptive slant rhyme distinguishing each couplet. Such external details invite us to consider the poetic ornamentation Moore employs in her own techniques. The bottle reflects the idealized poetic forms she strives to create: the spectacularly-ornamented and durable exterior that guards internal vulnerabilities while projecting a sense of its empowered strength. In this poem, imaginary possession is not merely an act of descriptive possession, but a process by which the poet showcases the qualities she most admires.

Notably, several key words in “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle”—“spectrum,” “polish,” and “perpendicular”—appear in two other prominent poems in the collection, in “To a Chameleon” and “In the Days of Prismatic Color.” Yet, in these poems, we begin to see cracks in the certainty of Moore’s possession. Instead, these poems expose tensions within Moore’s form of observation: between the poet’s desire to subsume personal iterations of voice within the poem’s polished landscape, and yet her recognition that linguistic ornamentation can only go so far. Nevertheless, “things” still remain illustrations through which Moore can project an empowered voice.

In “To a Chameleon,” the speaker addresses a common lizard, focusing on two prominent features: its ability to hide within its surroundings, and its ability to transform its external shape into a decorative shell—both characteristics we could ascribe to Moore’s poetry. Here, we again see the poet characterizing the thing through values essential to her own poetics. As we see in other *Observation* poems, themes of self-protection and self-determination emerge, with the chameleon representing an agent of transformative power. As the third poem in *Observations*, “To a Chameleon” helps establish themes thread throughout the book; yet, it also proves significant for its absence

from subsequent collections of Moore's work: she excises it from her *Selected Poems* and never includes it in later volumes. I am reading this particular textual history—the poem's prominence in *Observations* and subsequent removal from Moore's oeuvre—against the issues it displays over poetic mastery and voice. The poem's use of apostrophe deflects attention from the speaking subject and places it instead on the object under study; yet, in this case, Moore's rendering of the chameleon reveals a great deal about the speaker's own experience—and, specifically so as a creative agent engaged in the act of observation:

Hid by the august foliage and fruit of the grape vine,  
Twine  
Your anatomy  
Round the pruned and polished stem,  
Chameleon.  
Fire laid upon  
An emerald as long as  
The Dark King's massy  
One,  
Could not snap the spectrum up for food as you have done.  
(Schulze 53)

What carries “polish” is the vine's stem, around which the chameleon encircles its body like twine. An external hand has pruned this landscape into its rich ripe form, which when lit by the “fire” of the intense sun, transforms leaves into emeralds, and natural objects into decorative gems. Moore illustrates her own decorative shaping in the poem's opening lines, displaying consonance and rhyming couplets. Thus, poetry becomes the medium that creates “pruned and polished” materials; the chameleon's job is to master this skill for itself—of transforming its own exterior—in the pursuit of a similar polish.

The chameleon's transformation is specifically for the purposes of disguise. Although Moore depicts the lizard as self-sustaining and courageous—for others, she

notes, could not feed off the sunlight's band of colors as the chameleon has done—there is reason to read more complexity into her explicit praise. The word “spectrum” carries connotations beyond its association with light waves as any array of overlapping ideas. Thus, the chameleon proves masterful because it can sustain itself by consuming contradictions and oppositions. This thing is malleable, flexible, and capable of transforming to fit among widely-changing conditions, in much the same way that, for Moore, poetic things must be capacious enough to carry a wide array of meanings. Survival requires a particular exterior performance that disguises the chameleon's identity. We find the poet-speaker engaging in a similar process of disguise through her use of formal techniques: the rhyming couplets, the poem's tone, and the use of apostrophe—techniques that create a polished thing while promoting the speaker's impersonal distance. And yet, these very techniques also reveal the poet's limitations in achieving linguistic authority: this speaker is arguably not as successful as her subject at hiding within the poetic landscape. For example, several couplets reveal awkward loose rhyme (anatomy/stem, and as/ massy) with no real urgency to the variation; the backward revelation of the syntax—another tactic of disguise—denies crisp access to the image; and, most prominently, the uneven syllable length of each couplet (in, for example, “Hid by the august foliage and fruit of the grape vine,/ Twine”) creates a sense of imbalance and disruption. For a poem about the chameleon's impressive capacity for creative power, as well as its ability to hide within the decorative polish of its surfaces, we find a tension emerging in the skills of the poet-speaker. The resulting display of the speaker's linguistic limitations may suggest why Moore removes the poem from later collections. But, more important for our understanding of imaginary possession, the imbalance

suggests that a poem's distancing techniques, the impersonal polish, cannot fully disguise the subject who has encountered and transformed the object. In this case, the thing reveals Moore's drive to identify with the skilled chameleon—and to accomplish her own brilliant transformation—and, simultaneously, her recognition that no one, not even the poet, can “snap the spectrum up for food” with quite the perfection of this thing.

Before I address the preoccupations exposed in “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” I will first examine two other poems that present achieved things, “A Talisman” and “Roses Only.” “A Talisman” follows “To a Chameleon” in *Observations* and depicts another image of a thing captured in precise poetic form. Just as she did with “To a Chameleon,” Moore removes “A Talisman” from her *Selected Poems*, again raising questions about the efficacy of this observation in relation to Moore's larger oeuvre of poetic things. I argue that “A Talisman” reveals too explicitly the speaker's own conditions in the act of observation, specifically as a female subject pondering questions of poetic authority against a particularly male poetic tradition. In other words, Moore does not recede to a space of critical distance from the thing. The gender issues that the poem lays bare also illustrate a further quality of Moore's imaginary possession: that in crafting the perfected thing, Moore nonetheless celebrates its wild, unrestrained qualities, for her possession of the talisman comes through her connection with these very qualities.

In its subject matter, the poem provides another example of Moore's fascination with artistic objects. The speaker describes an ornamental talisman of brilliant blue lapis lazuli on which the image of a seagull has been engraved. This image captures the bird “With wings spread—// Curling its coral feet,/ Parting its beak to greet/ Men long dead” (Schulze 54), preserved, notably, just at the moment of interaction with human (male)

subjects. Again, Moore represents a common object—an un-regal seagull depicted on material strewn around a wrecked ship—transformed into magnificence through art. The poem transforms the ornamental talisman again into Moore’s own polished creation. In all of these layers of representation, Moore depicts the talisman as an empowered female figure whose wild energy defines the experience of encounter. Just as the talisman preserves the seagull at a specific moment of interaction with “men long dead,” the poem also captures the subject interacting with an artifact embodying a particular cultural history.<sup>45</sup> The gull confronts the seafarers, just as Moore confronts a literary tradition that she genders distinctly male. Moore’s representation of the talisman illustrates her identification with particular qualities of authority and strength: the bird is poised to soar on outstretched wings and to speak through its parting beak. As a creative agent, the speaker aspires to gain the talisman’s power, the seagull’s independent voice, and the lapis lazuli’s ornamental beauty.

In illustrating the product of imaginary possession, the poem also reveals Moore’s commitment to gaining an authoritative voice and distance from the thing. We can identify such authority in the poem’s strict form, which follows a pattern of three-line syllabic stanzas (6, 6, 3) with a clear rhyme scheme. Despite her achievement, Moore drops the piece from *Selected Poems*. Nevertheless, Eliot cites “A Talisman” in full in his Introduction with the following commentary: “The sentiment is commonplace, and I cannot see what a bird carved of *lapis-lazuli* should be doing with *coral* feet; but even here the cadence, the use of rhyme, and a certain authoritativeness of manner distinguish

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<sup>45</sup> In fact, Bonnie Costello suggests that the poem’s “acceptance of conventional symbolism” may be precisely why Moore later rejects the poem (*Imaginary Possessions* 40). I argue that Moore is deeply aware of the literary traditions she is working in—and yet working to transform (the “oppositional authority” Cristanne Miller identifies).

the poem” (Eliot 7). Eliot’s comment recognizes the authoritative voice that was central to *Observations*. What causes Moore to remove the poem from later collections? One probable cause is the lack of precision in the details Eliot highlights, given her commitment to authenticity and accuracy in her descriptions. Yet, another reason may lie in the explicitly gendered dimensions of the poem, which reveal personal concerns and an explicitly female approach to poetic authority, both ideas from which Moore would later distance herself. If Moore seeks a poetics in which she can disguise the subject’s more personal conditions among the poem’s landscape, “A Talisman” all too clearly marks her as a woman poised to challenge a specifically male tradition.<sup>46</sup> Moore’s construction of this thing, then, even with her own accomplished distancing, too easily reveals the urgency underlying the observation.

The final three poems I will discuss, “Roses Only,” “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” and “Critics and Connoisseurs,” are all examples in which Moore wrestles more explicitly with the poet’s challenges in gaining imaginary possession. These poems therefore embody the second category of Moore’s object poems: ones in which we can see greater evidence of the poet’s preoccupation with her own authority. In these poems, Moore reveals uncertainty about whether her poetic of things can live up to her own critical (and intellectual) aspirations. Of these poems, “Roses Only” may be read most obviously as illustrating another perfected “thing.” Yet, Moore tells us from the poem’s opening lines that the object’s “beauty is a liability/ rather than/ an asset” (Schulze 83). The thing’s perfected exterior is not necessarily the positive achievement one might

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<sup>46</sup> Suzanne Juhasz also identifies in Moore a tendency to remove from her poetics any traces of her gender in order to present an objective, authoritative voice: “Moore . . . can safely use only those elements of subjective personal experience that are not specifically sex-linked, and for even these she must find acceptable objective correlatives. She must, in other words, translate her experience into the masculine forms and symbols that are current and correct” (36).

imagine; instead, Moore celebrates the thorns, which she tells the rose are “the best part of you.” The poem displays the tension I have been discussing over how the artist can gain possession of the thing while maintaining critical distance in the representation. The poem, and particularly its title, initially suggests that Moore’s observation promotes the object’s autonomy and preserves accurate descriptions; in this reading, the perfected creation, the beautiful rose, would stand alone as sufficient evidence of imaginary possession. Nevertheless, Moore suggests that a more complex process is at play, as the poet claims a connection to the object through its thorns rather than its beauty. Imaginary possession comes by recognizing qualities the eye may not be conditioned to observe. The poet acknowledges the object’s self-protective impulse but must nonetheless find the means of gaining possession of an otherwise inaccessible object.

Just as we have seen in Frost’s poetry, Moore’s poems often support more than one reading, with complex arguments emerging in tension with a poem’s more simplistic surface narrative. In “Roses Only,” the simplistic narrative supports the object’s autonomous distance from the subject, with Moore urging the object’s resistance to the artist’s “predatory hand.” Directly addressing the rose, the speaker ponders the nature of its qualities, its beauty versus its thorns. She ultimately celebrates the thorns because they protect against the object’s violent possession, while beauty invites the possessor’s gaze:

. . . They are not proof against a worm, the elements, or mildew  
but what about the predatory hand? What is brilliance  
without co-ordination? Guarding the  
infinitesimal pieces of your mind, compelling audience to  
the remark that it is better to be forgotten than to be remembered too violently,  
your thorns are the best part of you.

To be forgotten is more desirable than to be handled “too violently,” or represented in a fashion counter to the object’s nature. While beauty draws attention to the rose’s exterior rather than its “brains,” it leaves the object unable to respond to potentially severe and unwarranted conclusions (“to confute presumptions resulting from observa- tion”). The thorns, on the other hand, guard the “infinitesimal pieces of [the object’s] mind.” In these lines, Moore seems to favor the rose’s resistance to the encountering subject, the “predatory hand” that may want to pluck the object, or, in the case of the poet, ascribe its nature.

Yet, as Taffy Martin argues in *Marianne Moore, Subversive Modernist* (1986), Moore’s poems often prove more subversive than an initial reading may suggest. Martin encourages critical attention to “the subversive side of her work” where “Moore emerges as a poet who responded to the twentieth century with humorous irony and aggressive optimism” (x). In “Roses Only,” interrogation of such irony reveals a vastly different reading. Even as Moore bemoans the problem of being misread by an aggressive eye, she is unwilling to reveal the guarded aspects of this thing: the minute details in its mind, the personal and individual experiences that must remain hidden (and, she reminds us, that audiences would rather forget). The thorny exterior proves “best” because it allows the poet to maintain authority over the aspects of the object’s nature she reveals. The beautiful petals, “the without-which-nothing/ of pre-eminence” (Schulze 83) are *not* the cause of the rose’s brilliance. In contrast, it is the thorns that control access to any such brilliance and require potential possessors to exercise precision in their interaction. Thorns keep the would-be possessor looking at the object from the outside and thus enforce a form of distancing between subject and object. Here, Moore recognizes some

measure of distance as inevitable in the process of imaginary possession; boundaries exist that even the individual poetic imagination cannot overcome.

Nevertheless, the speaker's personification of the rose suggests that subjective possession has already taken place. Moore acknowledges, "What is brilliance/ without co-ordination?": any representation of the thing's brilliance requires meticulous composition. Moore is less interested in preserving the rose through its own nature and identity, since, as she points out, the object's very nature remains inaccessible even to the most inquisitive eye. Instead, the poem acknowledges the challenges for the artist when certain qualities—in this case, the protective thorns—guard the object's core. The roses here are, ironically, not "Roses Only," but self-consciously created things whose brilliance depends, to a large extent, on the linguistic possession of the poet. The poem thus confirms that these objects have become things transformed through the process of imaginary possession. Further, Moore recognizes the cultural power imbued in this act of imaginary possession. In the rose's status as a polished thing, it becomes

... a symbol of the

unit, stiff and sharp,  
conscious of surpassing by dint of native superiority and  
liking for everything  
self-dependent, anything an

ambitious civilization might produce. (83)

The rose emerges as the product of an "ambitious civilization"—or, at least, an ambitiously civilizing agent in the form of the poet. We are back, in a sense, to the problem Moore warns about in "Those Various Scalpels," in which the act of possession is always an assertion of cultural power and superiority. Here, the act of transformation is a form of possession the poet can claim only through the force of superiority. The roses

thus reflect the concerns of a poet seeking authority over representation. Ironically, it is the thorns themselves, the object's very defensive characteristics, which allow such possession to take place. Although they guard the object's interiority, they also prompt the subject's imaginative connection. Without the rose's "membered" exterior—a particularly evocative image through Moore's syllabic line break—the object would be a "what-is-this, a mere// peculiarity"; it would not invite the poet's curiosity or concern. Instead, Moore presents the thorns in an image of reaching limbs, which invite the poet's imaginary possession specifically because they are protective qualities to which she can relate. Moore's fascination with armor proves a common theme throughout her work and must be read in relation to the defensive strategies she employs in her own poetics. Even as she admires the rose's inclination to protect itself—an impulse she understands—Moore pursues a voice of authority and superiority through which she can transform the rose into a thing. In a sense, these qualities are the very "thorns" the poem celebrates: techniques of distancing that complete the process of imaginary possession.

In other poems, Moore reveals more explicit anxieties about the poet's ability to claim certain authority of things, thus highlighting the challenges inherent in imaginary possession. Although "In the Days of Prismatic Color" is less object-focused in its rhetorical presentation, the poem highlights such preoccupations as it exposes observation as an act of limited perception. Recognizing the modern moment as exemplifying an Edenic fall, Moore laments the loss of a time when light granted the observing eye a gifted form of insight, and even indirect access to things resulted in complete vision: "with nothing to modify it but the/ mist that went up, obliqueness was a varia-/tion of the perpendicular, plain to see and/ to account for" (Schulze 91). As we

have seen in “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” perpendicularity for Moore is an artistic lens granting the reader a new form of access: “And art, as in a wave held up for us to see/ In its essential perpendicularity” (62). The poetic medium allows for enhanced perception. Moore often presents the made thing by drawing attention to the bright spectral surfaces the artist applies in its creation. As we saw in the glass bottle of a fish, its brilliant array of color was, in fact, the quality distinguishing it from its corresponding real-world object and prompting the subject’s imaginary possession. However, “In the Days of Prismatic Color” conveys greater ambivalence about whether modern artists can achieve pure perception in the rendering of things. The speaker laments the loss of a time

Not in the days of Adam and Eve, but when Adam  
was alone; when there was no smoke and color was  
fine, not with the fineness of

early civilization art but by virtue  
of its originality. (91)

Moore mourns this state of ideal observation when colors retained their crispness and the subject could access the landscape with total clarity. Notably, she marks this time as one preceding gendered experience, since “the days of prismatic color” are those before the creation of Eve. Such observation is no longer an option for modern artists since the world “is no/ longer that.” Brilliant color has been dulled; what was once simply “Truth” is now recognized as complexity where “complexity is not a crime but carry/ it to the point of murki-/ ness and nothing is plain.” In the face of such murkiness, the modern artist must find other means of gaining perception. One can extrapolate that the impulse to locate connection inherent in imaginary possession—the more feminine form of observation—would be necessary in the days following the creation of Eve. Her attention

here to the perfection of an Edenic state—and the artist’s inability now to represent such an ideal, aesthetic experience—adds a dimension to Moore’s focus on Adam’s story in “When I Buy Pictures.” The images Moore presents in that poem of artistic representation of Adam’s fall suggests even further her interest in using art to gain access to a time before the fall, “in the days of prismatic color.” The opportunity to perfect exteriors in the creation of things grants the poet a new form of power, and one gained specifically through an aesthetic achievement.

Moore acknowledges this problem of modern art as one facing her own poetics:

In the short legged, fitful  
advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae—we have the  
classic  
multitude of feet. To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo  
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it  
if it likes.  
Know that it will be there when it says:  
“I shall be there when the wave has gone by.” (91-92)

Art is an “advance” that proves “fitful” as the artist can only focus on the minute details of a landscape rather than its full horizon. Poetry, “the/ classic/ multitude of feet,” still grants the opportunity for creation, but the resulting art form lacks the clarity or permanence of “Truth” apparent in such classical art as the Apollo Belvedere, a sculpture long epitomizing aesthetic perfection. Poetry, even in a refined and sculpted form, can no longer embody such ideals and instead must find authentic ways of representing murkiness. The stakes for the poet’s act of observation are clear: observation may still involve the construction of “formal things,” but these things no longer carry singular, authoritative meaning. If we read this “wave” as the same one featured in “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” it is the very wave of art—of observation—that the object must withstand. This metaphor further destabilizes the idea of poetic

authority by suggesting that the artist's representation remains only a temporary surge that will "go by"; the abstraction of Moore's repetition of "it" in the above passage also illustrates the poet's inability to, ultimately, gain true clarity through art. The object will withstand the observation, while the thing preserved in the wave will only approximate complexities, communicate the speaker's own temporary imaginary possession, and convey no permanent truth. "In the Days of Prismatic Color" reveals limitations inherent in the act of observation that stand to thwart any singular possession. In a world where truths are inherently uncertain, possession remains an inherently unstable act.

The poem "Critics and Connoisseurs" also proves significant for revealing anxieties about imaginary possession. In this poem, Moore characterizes observation as an act undertaken with the poet's fear of imperfection, and poetic technique as a device of self-defense. The poem's very title suggests concerns over the opinion of some ideal critical reader—a figure reminiscent of Eliot himself—the kind of discerning reader looking to elevate only the best of his field. Moore showcases the word "fastidious" three times in the poem, highlighting the demanding nature of this critic, the figure with an impossible set of expectations. Yet, the examples she uses to illustrate such fastidiousness—the "unconscious fastidiousness" she claims is present in poetry, the "conscious fastidiousness" that has stalled a swan from swimming, and the "fastidious ant" determined in his effort to carry a stick (Schulze 77)—suggest that such a critical voice does not always impose judgment from the outside. Just as often it comes from the artist him or herself: the swan whose "Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the/ staple/ ingredients in its/ disinclination to move"; or the ant whose fastidiousness prompts him to carry the stick in all directions, only to "[abandon] the stick as/ useless and

overtaxing its/ jaws with a particle of whitewash pill-like but/ heavy” go “through the same course of procedure” (78). Such representations illustrate the animal/insect figure as one with high expectations and a determined set of standards for its own performance. These characteristics are the ones with which Moore identifies—and through which she begins to imaginatively possess these things. These qualities, for Moore, define ambition: “I have seen this swan and/ I have seen you; I have seen ambition without/ understanding in a variety of forms” (77). Moore links fastidiousness to ambition. Despite the speaker’s effort to formally distance herself from such qualities by projecting them onto the animals, the poem’s repetition and personification suggest these are ones she recognizes in herself. Moore admits this point in the poem’s opening line: “There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious/ fastidiousness.” She has seen such ambition without fully understanding it as part of her own nature.

In “Critics and Connoisseurs,” Moore presents poetry as an effort in striving for goals one will prove unable to meet, of reaching for perfection while knowing one will fall short. She makes a point to explain that such an attempt is admirable and even preferable to other forms of art:

Certain Ming  
products, imperial floor coverings of coach  
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have  
seen something  
that I like better—a  
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly  
ballasted animal stand up,  
similar determination to make a pup  
eat his meat on the plate.

While certain ancient artifacts boast their own beauty and perfection—the Ming dynasty was known for its restoration and development of the arts—Moore turns her attention to

real-life moments of imperfection, when the attempt to bolster the unstable object comes across as “childish” and yet intriguing and admirable. The poet’s possession through such moments, as well as her move to make such “imperfectly/ ballasted animal[s] stand up” via the medium of the poem—bolstering them through her own representation—suggests Moore’s recognition of both the vulnerabilities and limitations of the animals, as well as their determination. These are qualities underlying her own poetic fastidiousness: the sense that her high standards may be difficult to attain and yet her determination to repeat, as she observed in the ant, “the same course of procedure” (78). In the final lines, Moore admits:

What is  
there in being able  
to say that one has dominated the stream in an  
attitude of self defense,  
in proving that one has had the experience  
of carrying a stick?

She acknowledges the assertion of authority as an act of self-defense, an attempt to claim dominance in moments of vulnerability, exhaustion, and potential failure. The act of imaginary possession must also be read in this light, particularly given the speaker’s connection to the things (the swan, the ant, and the pup) she has created. Moore exposes the poetic authority she often claims through observation as a postured “attitude of self defense.”

In *Observations* Moore showcases a form of observation that complicates such concepts as emotion, intellect, and personality in the subject’s interaction with the object. She also complicates the opposition of “pleasure” and “contempt” by revealing that both experiences of the object are necessary for the poet’s creation of things. Moore’s polished poetic of exteriors most frequently presents things that serve as proof of the poet’s

imaginary possession. We find objects perfected in their precision of detail, form, and description. And yet, the object's transformation into an achieved thing is not the only objective of Moore's poetics. Instead, her things illustrate the subject's response to the object and aim to evoke a corresponding response in the viewer. Moore's focus on art objects allows her to demonstrate how a particular response—in this case, pleasure—can lead to the artist's imaginary possession. In the subject's encounter, pleasure guides her effort of transforming the object into a thing. Thus, Moore's things not only serve as proof of imaginary possession, but also as proof of the subject's response in the interaction. Evidence of such pleasure is preserved within the thing, if we can locate the "piercing glances" that will grant us access. Pleasure comes in various forms, including emotional, intellectual, and sensual responses; in all such manifestations, however, it suggests an engaged connection between the subject and object that we cannot entirely remove from the subject herself. To divorce the thing from its creator is to ignore the aspects of pleasure that have distinguished the encounter.

Nevertheless, in Moore's poetics, "pleasure" can also not be removed from its natural opposition, "contempt." As we have now seen Moore complicate other binaries, it is important to understand the way, in her poetics, these oppositions are actually connected. Reading with contempt and critical distance can promote pleasure, because it fosters new experiences and understandings of the object. However, in her emphasis on contempt, Moore also risks alienating the reader from the material entirely by employing techniques that too heavily promote a disconnection from the human elements of the subject-object connection. By recognizing the value Moore places on "contempt," we can better understand the speaker's retreat to a place of critical distance within poem's

rhetorical act, as well as Moore's use of distancing techniques such as her elevated, scientific and Latinate diction, unattributed quotations, vague pronouns, syllabic forms that denaturalize syntax, and frequent concluding lines and revisions that shift into abstraction. Contempt allows the poet to resolve her own preoccupations about the authority she aims to demonstrate. If "pleasure" provides a way into the object, "contempt" allows the poet to gain the distance required for her to claim a voice of authority. Moore's poetics thus illustrates a tension between closeness and distance, between pleasure and contempt, as the poet negotiates what it means to assert possession over the thing. Among the modernist poets in this study, Moore provides another example of a poet using things to negotiate her own preoccupations with poetic authority as she transform the subject's individual, temporary, experience of the object into a more polished, and permanent, structure.

### Chapter Three: “THE WORLD IS NEW”: William Carlos Williams’s Imagination and the Renewal of Things

XXII

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens (I 138)

William Carlos Williams’s well-known poem has helped solidify the idea of a modernist fascination with objects wherein the poet’s description captures some essence of the object’s form while maintaining its separation from the gazing subject. This reading is best encapsulated in J. Hillis Miller’s seminal 1969 reading of Williams as a “poet of reality” whose central obligation to the object lies in his dual tasks of seeing and naming. “His attitude toward things,” Miller writes of Williams, “like Ezra Pound’s, is nominalist. Each object is itself and nothing more should be said about it” (307). Of the poem cited above, perhaps the most widely-anthologized from Williams’s 1923 collection *Spring and All*, Miller claims, “The wheelbarrow, in a famous poem, does not stand for anything or mean anything. It is an object in space dissociated from the objects around it, without reference beyond itself. It is what it is. The aim of the poem is to make it stand there for the reader in its separateness, as the words of the poem stand on the page” (307).

Yet, the poem itself complicates such a reading, given Williams’s assertion, from the first line, that “so much depends/ upon” the wheelbarrow. Through the object’s

relation to other objects and to the speaker's reading of the scene, it becomes a "thing," in Bill Brown's terms: an object containing ideas, associations, and meanings that exceed its use value as an object. Poetic devices demonstrate Williams's firm hand in this representation: radical enjambment breaking apart the compound words "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater" controls which aspects of the object gather focus, momentum, and distinction. Phonetic repetitions, such as the long-'a' sound in "glazed with rain" and long-'i' sound in "beside the white," demonstrate the poet's authority to shape the colors and textures that gain emphasis. The utilitarian function of the wheelbarrow diminishes against the visual nature of the image, despite the fact that the opening line affirms the wheelbarrow's essential function in that "so much depends/ upon" it (for example, cleaning a chicken coup). Yet, the descriptions do more than paint a linguistic picture. The poetic techniques emphasize an object transformed by a moment: a wheel rendered distinct from the barrow it carries, a glaze of rain that has altered the object's very nature (in the subject's perceiving eye), a relation to the chickens that has been abstracted into the contrast of red and white. The object has been metamorphosed from a utilitarian tool into an artistic representation highlighting color, texture, and sound; from an object experienced in the world to a thing that remains wholly relational, "dependent upon," some individual experience of the poet's gaze. Even the word "depends" carries poetic implications in its definition of hanging down or being suspended, as a line break; each line of the poem hangs on the precision of the one before it. This object does not remain "separate," as Miller suggests, "without reference beyond itself," but instead proves a poetic thing wholly dependent upon the subjective agent of its creation.

Despite more than four decades of responses to Miller's work, his interpretation remains arguably the most dominant reading of Williams's approach to objects.<sup>47</sup> He defines Williams's poetics as one wherein the poet has resigned the ego and the private consciousness of his personal history, and no longer seeks to define a self against the external world. Williams "gives himself up in despair and establishes a self beyond personality, a self coextensive with the universe. Words, things, people, and God vanish as separate entities and everything becomes a unit" (291).<sup>48</sup> In turn, Williams moves "beyond romanticism" (287) and no longer strives to overcome the self's distance from outside objects; instead, all things can exist simultaneously:

Romantic poetry, like idealist philosophy, had been based on an opposition between the inner world of the subject and the outer world of things. Since the world is other than the self, that self can ground itself on something external. . . . In Williams [this tradition] disappears. . . . Gone are both the profound abysses of subjectivity, so important in earlier poetry, and the limitless dimensions of the external world. . . . In Williams's mature work, if something exists at all, it dwells in the only realm there is, a space both subjective and objective, a region of

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<sup>47</sup> In elevating Williams as the culmination of a modern "poetics of reality," Miller initiated the prominent scholarly attention to Williams over the last several decades. His study cannot be underestimated for its significance in promoting Williams as a central figure in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American poetry, a notion supported by the number of post-modern poets (across a range of aesthetic styles) who have claimed Williams as a predecessor. As Paul Mariani has written, "However we view his approach and strategy, J. Hillis Miller's is one of the most important and seminal encounters in the [then] sixty-years of Williams criticism. Miller can be argued with and perhaps substantially qualified; he cannot be dismissed" (*Poet and Critics* 198).

<sup>48</sup> Miller dates this change to an episode of despair in Williams's early twenties. He cites a letter from Williams to Marianne Moore, in which the poet claims an "inner security" resulting from "something which occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up" (*SL* 147; qtd. in Miller 287).

copresence in which anywhere is everywhere, and all times are one time.

(288)

In the poet's approach to objects, Miller finds that "Williams can look straight at the object because it offers no threat. There is nothing alien or distant about it. It proposes no invitation to the poet's violence. The objectivity of his descriptions affirms his security. . . . Poetry of this kind is a way of letting things be" (306). In the case of the red wheelbarrow, according to Miller's reading, the object reflects nothing of the subject's experience of interaction; the poet's descriptions allow the object to exist "within the universal realm made of the poet's coextension with the world."

Miller identifies three aspects of the object that get expressed as Williams works to bring them into balance: the "formless ground, origin of all things; the formed thing, defined and limited; [and] a nameless presence, the 'beautiful thing', there in every form but hidden by it" (328). The formless origin is a place beyond language from which creation is initiated, the pre-material state from which, we might say, spring approaches in the opening poem of *Spring and All*:

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined—  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance—Still, the profound change

has come upon them: rooted they  
grip down and begin to awaken (I 95-96)

The formless origin is the space from which objects emerge with the “stark dignity of entrance,” knowing nothing except that they enter. Miller describes it as “what was already there, chaotic, senseless, absurd, but fecund, holding within itself the possibility of all forms” (328). It is also the space of creative potential out of which the artist brings the object into existence (“One by one objects are defined”). The object emerges to become the “formed thing” Miller cites above, now defined and limited by particular planes of existence. The formed thing proves that which we can see and categorize through the object’s material qualities, function, or value. Finally, the “beautiful thing” represents the object’s universal essence, some element that has remained unnamed because it is hidden. It is the aspect marked, as Williams describes above, by some “profound change” that has “[begun] to awaken” (196) and becomes the part Williams pursues most in his object representation.

Miller’s description of these three aspects suggests a poet striving to capture some unarticulated essence of beauty within the object that was “covered up as soon as the form [was] fixed in a shape” (332). Miller describes, “Every birth is an uncovering of the secret, but as soon as the child is assimilated into the already existing human community, the flame is shaded, the unique is reduced to common measure.” He posits that Williams’s focus on birth presents the opportunity to recognize the beautiful thing’s authentic presence before it is masked by ideologies or associations. He also finds Williams’s repeated use of flower imagery related to the beautiful thing: “As objects rise from the ground and blossom, the delicate perfume of beauty is released” (333). Through the poem, Williams liberates from the object some intangible presence, making it concrete and lasting. When Miller speaks of Williams’s resignation of ego, he suggests

some ideal achievement wherein the poet has set aside all personal and cultural associations and can now access a pre-social concept of the object in some pure form. Through enhanced perception, the poet translates this vision into the “beautiful thing” existing in copresence with all other “beautiful things.”

In applying to Miller’s reading the terminology of Bill Brown’s “thing theory”—wherein object and thing are two separate entities—it becomes clear that Miller’s theory focuses on the object at the expense of the thing. His “formed thing” addresses the object’s material shape as it exists in the world. Even his “beautiful thing”—the pure essence pursued by the poet—represents a version stripped of ideas and meanings that have been projected onto and carried within the object. Miller’s focus on Williams as a “self beyond personality,” devoid of all ego, defines him as a poet writing outside of any subjective experience that may inform his rendering of things. In a sense, Miller invites us to consider the object purified from any aspects of “thingness.” Thus, Miller’s “beautiful thing,” despite employing the same terminology, differs sharply from Brown’s concept of the “thing”: an entity that encapsulates multiple meanings beyond the object itself—most significantly, meanings that subjects project onto objects through individual linguistic, cultural, and personal histories. In contrast to my study, Miller’s theory of Williams as a “poet of reality” focuses on the “object” at the expense of understanding how his poetics, in fact, addresses the creation of “things”—and, specifically, “things” through which we can gain glimpses of the subject’s personal experience in the encounter. As Williams claims in his 1928 essay “French Painting: The Embodiment of Knowledge,” all art involves a process of transformation that elevates the object to a creation: “How shall the multiplicity of a natural object, impossible to detail or

completely encircle, be presented by pigment on canvas? . . . . For this is the flat of it: all painting is representation and cannot be anything else” (69). The artist views the object from a particular perspective and determines its form through his choice of representation.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Williams’s poetics addresses more than the object alone, as Williams reminds us in the opening of the red wheelbarrow: “so much depends/ upon” that object based on the artist’s perspective.<sup>50</sup>

Let me clarify that Williams himself does not employ the terminology of thing theory I have been using thus far, although he does make frequent references in the prose of *Spring and All* to both objects and things. More precisely, when he uses such words as “object” and “thing,” he does not distinguish objects as physical materials in the world and things as their poetic transformation. Nevertheless, he experiences the material world as made anew by the imagination. For consistency, I will maintain the distinction I have been applying throughout this project in referring to objects as the actual materials in the world and things as their resulting poetic creations. In the case of Williams, however, it is clear that he conceives of two separate forms of the object: the original object the poet encounters in the world and a separate thing the artist creates through his representation. As he declares in *Spring and All*, “The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation” (I 111). To describe a mere physical object would be to render a “plagiarism after nature”; however,

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<sup>49</sup> In this essay, Williams makes little distinction between painters and writers, both of whom he notes are obligated “to represent” (Dijkstra, *RI* 70). Thus, he outlines a philosophy with direct application to his own poetry: “French painting from this viewpoint escaping the cliché of the predominant ism of the moment can be highly instructive to the writer—and has been for me.” For both painters and writers, pursuit of the object comes down to representation via “the same question of words and technique in their arrangement.”

<sup>50</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham discusses the thing, what he calls “an externalized version of identity, absorbing vague longings, momentary reflections, and fugitive impulses,” using Williams’s language of dependence as also a form of dependence upon the subject: “Much depends, of course, on the thing. And the very best things are products of human agency” (136).

to capture the object through the imagination produces a new thing altogether—“a creation.”

Thus, like the other poets in this dissertation, Williams does in fact transform objects into things, and, in the process, reveals a subject exploring his own conditions. In Williams’s poetics, the distinction between object and thing can be mapped onto his terminology of “local” and “universal,” since Williams advocates a form of local contact that will grant access to some universal realm. It may be useful to reconsider Miller’s notion of the “beautiful thing” here, for although Miller sees the object as separate from the subject, he does recognize within it an original, purified essence that the achieved act of naming can put on display. I agree that Williams remains conscious of the authority inherent in naming; nevertheless, I see his concept of the universal as one that depends upon the subject’s experience. The universal represents those experiences of humanity that the subject has a responsibility to convey. As we have seen in the work of Robert Frost and Marianne Moore, Williams’s creation of the thing marks a particular achievement of poetic authority, with the poet employing techniques that allow him to move from the local to the universal. Nevertheless, this process is neither easy nor certain, and Williams’s object poems often acknowledge the difficulties the poet faces in enacting this transformation. For Williams, the thing must be authentic to the subject’s local experience of contact but nonetheless provide proof of the object’s renewal, via the imagination, into the universal. As we will see in the work itself, Williams’s application of both concepts incorporates the subject’s individual experience of interaction. Thus, the local object, even in its universalized transformation, preserves the feelings, questions, desires, and anxieties generated through the subject’s contact. Further, Williams’s

concept of the universal allows him to forge connections between the individual subject and broader humanity; in the process, he elevates the poet-figure as an essential cultural voice at this moment of modernity. At stake is the culture's very transformation as Williams privileges the subject's local experience to gain greater knowledge of the conditions in which he lives. At a moment distinguished by the subject's isolation and fragmentation, Williams aims to inspire within his readers a communal sense that human experience can be universalized and shared.

*Spring and All* (1923) is the book in which Williams most clearly demonstrates a concentration on objects, with the intent of renewing materials through their creative transformation. Composed in an early phase of his career, when Williams was still establishing his place among modern artists and poets, this book raises questions of epistemology and representation specifically through the artist's interaction with the local—an approach Williams would maintain throughout his career and advocate most explicitly in Book I of his epic poem, *Paterson* (1946), in which he calls for “no ideas but in things” (6). Throughout *Spring and All*, Williams argues for the essential function of the imagination in the process of creating things. He sees his project as dedicated not only to outlining the imagination but also to demonstrating its potential: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. This is its book” (89). Williams praises the imagination as a means of transforming the object into art: “The imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was. Now indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of ‘art’” (193). The imagination prompts the object's change, although the resulting thing maintains

its form as the “likeness of that which it was.” Yet, when the imagination is allowed to thrive, Williams states, “THE WORLD IS NEW” (95), because the imagination alters the subject’s recognition of the world. To put this in Brown’s terms, Williams’s language of destruction suggests that the poet must first strip the object of its “thingness”—all outdated meanings and associations—in order to reinvest it with meanings more authentic to the poet’s actual experience.<sup>51</sup>

*Spring and All* also represents an important collection because of its unique structure as a book. In addition to the 27 sparse poems the work is most known for, it contains 18 sections of prose. One cannot fully read the poems without reading them against, or often through, ideas punctuated in the prose. The textual history of *Spring and All* sheds light on the relationship between its poetry and prose. Although the pieces were originally published together, this initial French publication in 1923 had a run of only 300 copies—many of which, as Paul Mariani notes, were confiscated by customs en route to the U.S. The two parts were not reprinted together until the 1970 New Directions *Imaginations*.<sup>52</sup> Thus, given that *Spring and All* did not exist in its current (and original) textual form throughout most of the twentieth century, it is little surprise that critics have often failed to read the poetry against the prose. Critics initially dismissed the value of the prose, most prominently Marjorie Perloff, who has called Williams’s prose accounts of

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<sup>51</sup> Miller identifies a similar process of object purification; yet, he does not read the created thing as revealing the subject’s investment of new ideas, associations, or meanings.

<sup>52</sup> When I cite from *Spring and All* throughout this chapter, I use the 1970 version in *Imaginations*, since it is the most widely-available replica of the 1923 text. Further, the 1970 version is remarkably consistent with the original version, incorporating all of the typographical variations that Williams included in his original text. As Williams described in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*:

It was written when all the world was going crazy about typographical form and is really a travesty on the idea. Chapter headings are printed upside down on purpose, the chapters are numbered all out of order, sometimes with a Roman numeral, sometimes with an Arabic, anything that came in handy . . . But the poems were kept pure—no typographical tricks when they appear—set off in prose. They are numbered consistently; none had titles though they were to have titles later... (36-37)

his prosodic technique “confusing and contradictory” (160). Yet, more recently critics have begun to look at what Linda Welshimer Wagner calls the text’s “unity of design” in arguing for the importance of the prose in any final assessment of the book. I pick up on this very concept of the book’s unity in arguing that the poetry and prose are dependent upon one another for a complete assessment of Williams’s goals. For while Williams intends the poems to demonstrate the full potential of the imagination—to render the thing in a manner that makes it a universally-accessible experience for poet and reader alike—the surrounding prose often delineates the poet’s thoughts about this process; the prose helps reveal both his goals for the imagination, as well as the poems’ potential failures in achieving them. Thus, the prose becomes a means to evaluate the ideas Williams invests in things as he elevates objects from their particular conditions to their universal essence.

It is on this very point, of the local object transformed into some universal quality, that Williams reveals his particular preoccupation with the poet’s function. As Williams enacts the object’s change, he promotes a form of contact with the material world that can elevate the local object to some realm of more universally-shared knowledge. While throughout his career he frequently affirms his commitment to the local,<sup>53</sup> Williams also aspires to grant the reader access to a universal realm of experience—a place he describes in *Spring and All*, rather abstractly, as “the fourth dimension . . . the endlessness of knowledge” (I 139). The very difficulty of this task—of representing the object in a

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<sup>53</sup> *Paterson* (1946) represents the culmination of this philosophy, about which Williams noted in a 1951 “Statement by William Carlos Williams About the Poem *Paterson*”: “The thing was to use the multiple facets which a city presented as representatives for comparable facets of contemporary thought thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him. . . . Thus the city I wanted as my object had to be one that I knew in its most intimate details” (xiii).

manner that is both local and universal—marks a tension over poetic function, which, for Williams, has a great deal at stake.

The pursuit of the universal allows the poet to forge connections that may alter the culture's knowledge of itself. Although Williams undoubtedly invests multiple meanings in his creation of things, I am most interested in those that render the thing a marker of actual human experience, a record of individual human contact. As Williams promotes a more conscious subject-object connection, he pursues similar relations with the reader, with whom, he claims, "in the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, 'I' I mean also, 'you'" (I 88). Even as Williams attends to local experience, he is working to transcend this realm and connect the subject with things beyond itself. At this particular moment in the early-twentieth century, Williams's concepts of the local and universal reflect a desire to acknowledge human experience and promote human contact, and thus reduce the sense of isolation facing the modern subject.

The *Spring and All* poem numbered "XXIV" encapsulates the ideas of human contact that are at stake for Williams. The poem begins:

The leaves embrace  
in the trees

it is a wordless  
world

without personality  
I do not

seek a path  
I am still with

Gipsy lips pressed  
to my own— (142-143)

Williams acknowledges the world as separate from any individual's personality; in its "wordless" state, the world exists without the limitations of any single meaning imposed through the act of naming. Attaching words to things—and presenting poems that translate objects via language—is itself an act asserting individual personality and ownership. The first half of the poem suggests the "I" existing in the very "copresence" Miller describes: the "I" is "still" and blazes no individual path of its own, content merely to record the subject's coexistence with objects along its path. Comparing subject-object contact to pressing "Gipsy lips" suggests that such contact has proven transient, impermanent, and unstable; subjects and objects intersect but find no permanent placement in each other.

A shift occurs in the second half of the poem as the experience of the "I" becomes more prominent, and in a manner that illustrates the speaker's individual experience of the object:

It is the kiss of leaves  
without being  
poison ivy  
or nettle, the kiss  
of oak leaves—  
He who has kissed  
a leaf  
need look no further—  
I ascend  
through  
a canopy of leaves  
and at the same time  
I descend

for I do nothing  
unusual—

I ride in my car  
I think about

prehistoric caves  
in the Pyrenees—

the cave of  
*Les Trois Frères*

Williams presents the interaction as an intense personal exchange, a “kiss” that does not irritate in the manner of poison ivy, but instead brings the subject into closer understanding of the leaves. He mentions that “he who has kissed/ a leaf,” or experienced a similar moment of exchange, may understand this feeling of “ascension,” of reaching some universal knowledge, though Williams refrains from making explicit what this knowledge actually is. But Williams does not dwell in act of ascension, promptly turning to the fact that the speaker “descends” (in much the same way Robert Frost does in “Birches”) and returns to his “usual” acts of driving about in his car. The poem has moved from the subject’s local experience of the object to universal knowledge of contact, and then back again to the subject’s experience in the local. We can see further evidence in the poem’s transition from third person to first person, from the general experience of “he” to that of the particular experience of “I.” Despite this shift, even in the final lines, the speaker is most concerned with achieving a universal realm that can communicate human experience well beyond the subject’s particular moment of existence. In the final image of the Cave of the Trois-Frères, whose prehistoric cave art dates back to 13,000 B.C., Williams compares his own effort to preserve and universalize the subject’s experience with that of prehistoric artists who undertook a similar project.

Art, he reminds us, forges human connections because it serves as a record of human existence.<sup>54</sup> Williams uses the leaves, then, both to mark the speaker's individual interaction and to achieve some transformed universal knowledge. As things, the leaves convey meanings beyond their natural forms as objects and instead carry meanings about the subject's experience.

### **The Imagination: The Force of Renewal**

In the poems of *Spring and All*, Williams illustrates the process by which the subject's local experience prompts his creation of a universal experience. For Williams, objects become things through the process of the imagination. His invocation of the "imagination" as integral for promoting access to "universal" realms certainly carries the sound of a neo-Romantic philosophy.<sup>55</sup> And yet, my reading of Williams's use of objects places him firmly in a modernist tradition, largely because, even as he aspires for contact, he is not interested in attaining some spiritual realm; instead, his very concept of the universal focuses on expanding the subject's knowledge of its own experience. Further, Williams's concept of the universal does not move into a realm of abstraction, but remains grounded in the concrete material details of things.

Williams's imagination diverges from what Samuel Coleridge describes as "a power which when employed on the works of the Creator elevates and by the variety of its pleasures almost monopolizes the soul. We see our God everywhere—the Universe in

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<sup>54</sup> We saw Marianne Moore make a similar gesture toward the universal potential of art in "When I Buy Pictures," in which she locates objects that grant access to human experience predating her own. The poem suggests that the object's transformation into art allows it to transcend history and thus fosters a human connection between subject and object.

<sup>55</sup> A large body of scholarship reads Williams as descending from a Romantic tradition in the line of Emerson and Whitman, including Carl Rapp's *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (1984), Albert Gelpi's *A Coherent Splendor* (1987), and Donald Markos's *Ideas in Things* (1994). Both Rapp and Markos engage the question of how Williams's engagement with objects, specifically, promotes the imagination, with Rapp concluding that Williams's objects become traditional receptacles for the poet's emotional life, and Markos observing a view of organic harmony with the object world.

the most literal Sense is his written language” (338-339). Coleridge’s imagination allows the artist to see God’s “written language” reflected in the physical world; poetry inspired by the imagination captures some divine essence of the object embedded by the Creator. Likewise, American Romantic Ralph Waldo Emerson defines the imagination as a higher form of perception that can recognize the spirituality residing in all things:

This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others. The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendency of their own nature, —him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet’s part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that. (“The Poet” 331-332)

Like Coleridge, Emerson places the imagination as a cognitive power that can access some “divine aura” within the object. Emerson also describes the kind of the subject-object interaction that allows such perception to gain force. The subject must “share the path” and “accompany” the object; he must transcend the boundaries of his own physical body and subjective mind to connect to the object’s “nature,” “path,” or “aura.” Naming in this type of contact—the subject’s complete merging with the object—involves the poet speaking not about the object as a form of external study but from some place within it. The subject must find a means of actually “being where and what it sees.” For one to classify Williams’s notion of the imagination as Romantic, we would expect it to reflect

particular Romantic concepts, for example that the poet proves prophetic by naming the object's divine qualities; or that the poet pursues complete submersion within the object, shedding intellectual, emotional, or physical experiences that would otherwise bind him to personal conditions. In the Romantic imagination, the poet transcends subjective limitations to achieve what Emerson calls "the condition of true naming" ("The Poet" 332), whereby he can fully merge with and know the object's divine essence.

Williams's imagination clearly differs from that of the Romantics. In *Spring and All*, he describes the imagination as a force that can reawaken man's consciousness and inspire greater knowledge of the object world, and he specifies from the opening prose that such an experience will not "divorce" the poet "from life" but instead will "refine . . . clarify . . . and intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live" (I 89). Williams is aimed at expanding man's intellect by illuminating the very conditions in which he lives. His reader, he states, "never knows and never dares to know what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested" (89). Williams wants to enhance the subject's awareness of its own conditions. As such, he eschews the language of religion, spirituality, or divinity, except to say that the imagination can be a "practical corrective" to help the poet "rediscover or replace demoded meanings to the religious terms" (100). Instead, he employs scientific metaphors, describing a force "comparable to electricity or steam": "The imagination uses the phraseology of science. It attacks, stirs, animates, is radio-active in all that can be touched by action. Words occur in liberation by virtue of its processes" (149). The imagination generates activity through its reanimation of language—imbuing words with new life by liberating them from inherited associations and, in a sense, stripping them of

stale aspects of “thingness.” As in science, this force pursues the creation of concrete facts, observable through their distinct conditions. Only then can Williams recreate the thing through the actual conditions of the subject’s contact.

The poem titled “V” reveals Williams’s theory of the imagination as aimed at renewing objects into things; in this case, the object of the poem is the black wind he describes in the opening lines:

Black winds from the north  
enter black hearts. Barred from  
seclusion in lilies they strike  
to destroy—  
Beastly humanity  
where the wind breaks it—

Strident voices, that  
quicken, built of waves

Drunk with goats or pavements

Hate is of the night and the day  
of flowers and rocks. (*I* 102)

The poem presents several associations a reader may have of “black winds” that “strike to destroy” a dark, beastly vision of humanity—representations of destructive impulses. Yet, it is Williams that aims to destroy the stale associations, the “thingness” that has preceded the winds and given readers preexisting notions of what this symbol may represent. He claims, “Nothing/ is gained by saying the night breeds/ murder—It is the classical mistake.” Rejecting existing associations, he focuses instead on the subject’s sensual and physical contact with the wind: “There is nothing in the twist/ of the wind but—dashes of cold rain” (103). The poet must not rely on the “crude symbolism” Williams has warned against in the preceding prose section; he turns to actual experience. Yet, the linguistic play on “dashes of cold rain” following an actual dash suggests that

Williams is also aware of the deeply constructed nature of the representation. And, in fact, after he describes the winds alongside “submarine vistas/ purple and black fish turning/ among undulant seaweed—”, he shifts into consideration of the subject’s emotional experience:

Black wind, I have poured my heart out  
to you until I am sick of it—

Now I run my hand over you feeling  
the play of your body—the quiver  
of its strength—

The grief of the bowmen of Shu  
moves nearer—There is  
an approach with difficulty from  
the dead—the winter casing of grief

Here, the subject observing the wind reveals himself as anything but emotionally-detached. We learn that the previous outpouring has been deeply personal; even his feelings towards “black hearts,” “bestly humanity,” and “hate” reflect the subject’s emotional state. As the speaker acknowledges emotional aspects of his experience, he again describes his physical engagement with the object—a hand touching the wind and feeling its shuddering strength. This description, in turn, sparks another personal association: the image of quivering wind generates an allusion to Pound’s “Song of the Bowmen of Shu,” in which the speaker there describes the weapons of war: “the generals have ivory arrows/ and quivers ornamented with fish-skin” (Pound, *SP* 50). Williams has likened the sharp force of the wind to arrows of war. The speaker of Pound’s poem is a Chinese army commander vocalizing his grief and longing over the displacement of war: “When we set out, the willows were drooping with spring,/ We come back in snow,/ We go slowly, we are hungry and thirsty,/ Our mind is full of sorrow, who will know of our

grief?” We find that through Williams’s study of the wind, his poem has been focused on a similar exploration of grief as Pound’s “Song.” The emotional undercurrent of “V,” we come to realize, has been the subject’s own experience of grief—the destructive anger it produces, the sense of despair over the conditions of humanity, the inevitability of hate that, only with the passage of time, tempers into acceptance of grief’s costs. The imagination has renewed the object by stripping it of previous associations and then investing in it the personal emotions marking the subject’s encounter. In the final lines, Williams admits, “How easy to slip/ into the old mode, how hard to/ cling firmly to the advance—.” Here, he acknowledges a preoccupation with his ability to generate a truly transformative poetics. Although the “advance” is a purely poetic experience—since poems “advance” from one line to the next—the concluding dash suggests that Williams remains hesitant and uncertain about this very poetic function. Can the poem advance in the way the poet intends? Even as he has sought to strip the object of associations and to privilege the subject’s actual experience, Williams finds himself relying upon certain common—and universalizing—ideas and techniques. Even as the poet “clings” to his advance, his task of reinvigorating language proves to be anything but simple.

Williams’s form of object study stands to grant the subject a higher vision of his relations to the surrounding world:

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action as

proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates  
a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so  
words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight

(149-150)

Language is “freed by the imagination” so the subject can reinvest in it new meanings; the renewed object becomes a new universalized thing that can soar like a bird taking flight, no longer tethered to the subject’s local point of contact. Williams speaks of this turn, from local object to universal thing, as a form of “cleavage”: “the jump from prose to the process of the imagination” (133). The word “cleavage” here proves significant, for while a cleavage is a division, the word “cleave” also means to cling. Williams represents this move from the local to the universal as a form of division, but also one attained by remaining close to the local experience. Tellingly, he cites Edgar Allan Poe as a model of “the first American poet [who] had to be a man of great separation—with close identity to life” (111). Although this description may initially seem contradictory—a poet who is both separated from worldly conditions and yet closely identified with them—it reflects the conflicting impulse I have identified in *Spring and All* as Williams seeks to represent individual experience and render it universal. He wants a poetry that can take flight, but nonetheless resonate with readers through its close “identity to life.”

In fact, Williams pursues a poetics that can accomplish both tasks. This apparent contradiction relates back to the very criticism scholars such as Douglas Mao and Lori Merish raised in their critique of Brown’s “thing theory.” Like Brown, Williams seems to believe the thing can grant access to some transnational and transcultural form of

knowledge, un-tethered from the particular subject's experience. And yet, for Williams, as we have seen, local objects cannot be stripped of subjective meanings in their transformation into universal things; such a move would rid things of the very humanity Williams wants them to communicate. Instead, Williams seeks trans-historical knowledge of the universal through culturally-and-historically specific details of the local. In this move, he suggests that the emotional experiences binding humanity are more common than one might think. Thus, his poetics strives to communicate human knowledge and emotion, thereby promoting a more conscious recognition of human experience.

**“The local is the only universal”<sup>56</sup>: Transforming the local object into a universal thing**

I have thus far examined what is at stake for Williams in his concept of the universal, but it is also critical to understand why he advocates local contact as the best means of achieving the universal. In various writings, including letters, essays and his *Autobiography*, Williams discusses art focused on the “local” as that which represents the artist's conscious interaction with his environment. Thus, Williams's advocacy of the “local” is not about focusing on objects one finds in a local landscape (although this does tend to occur in the process), but is rather about exploring the artist's experience within this landscape. Louis Simpson affirms this point in focusing on the human aspects of experience that get invested in Williams's concept: “The word ‘local’ may be misleading. It doesn't mean Rutherford, nor even America—it means experience, of which sensory experience is primary—. . . This is how locality comes in, but the emphasis isn't on the

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<sup>56</sup> Williams cites this quote from John Dewey in his *Autobiography*: “John Dewey had said (I discovered it quite by chance), ‘The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds’” (391).

locality; it is on the experience” (257). The local is not a form of regionalism advocating the artist’s connection to a particular place; instead, it represents the need to “ground” any experience in a given place.<sup>57</sup> Simpson expounds, “Therefore it appears that when Williams argues for the local he means the artist’s sensory experience rooted in place—not merely staying in one place” (259). Simpson cites Williams’s own claims in the essay “The Work of Gertrude Stein,” in which he defines the local as “the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience” (Williams, *SE* 118). For Williams, the “local” represents a mode of interaction with outside objects that is less about the objects themselves than the artist’s experience of them—the questions they raise for him in a moment in time, the mental or sensual responses he ponders in determining his relationship to them.

As Williams states in *Spring and All*, the poet can “be there to enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world . . . with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent—moving at will from one thing to another—as he please, unbound—complete” (121). This experience of contact allows the subject to remain distinct from the object, free to engage and withdraw, and responsible only to his own enhanced understanding of the experience. The resulting thing records his exploration of

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<sup>57</sup> Williams uses the word “ground” in *In the American Grain* (1925) as he argues for greater understanding of the fundamental values that have shaped the nation’s character from the beginning. He promotes his reader’s awareness of this history, claiming “That unless everything that is, proclaim a ground on which it stand, it has no worth; and that what has been morally, aesthetically worth while in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground” (109). The implications of this effort, for Williams, have to do with the subject’s awareness of its own moral and cultural inheritance:

It is an extraordinary phenomenon that Americans have lost the sense, being made up as we are, that what we are has its origin in what *the nation* in the past has been; that there is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do; that morals affect the food and food the bone, and that, in fine, we have no conception at all of what is meant by moral, since we recognize no ground our own—and that rudeness rests all upon the unstudied character of our beginnings.

“Ground” in the above passages represents, both, the foundational moral qualities that have determined the nation’s progress and the very process by which Williams will locate such characteristics: by mining the physical ground of the New World.

questions, anxieties, desires, and other conditions distinguishing his interaction with the “ground.” The diminished importance of the object itself becomes significant when you consider the kinds of objects Williams frequently addresses in *Spring and All*: non-distinct natural objects such as leaves, trees, wind, moonlight, or flowers; or seemingly insignificant objects such as a piece of candy, a paper box, apartment furniture, a wheelbarrow—materials he describes in one well-known poem as strewn “about the edge of refuse” that nonetheless allow him to strive toward “the universality of things” (I 117-118). What matters about the object, for Williams, is not the kind of object with which the subject interacts, but rather its representation of actual local contact.

In “French Painting,” Williams affirms his support of the artist’s individual, concrete and local experience of the object:

What does exist, and in heightened intensity for the artist is the impression created by the shape and color of an object before him in his sensual being—his whole body (not his eyes) his body, his mind, his memory, his place: himself—that is what he sees—And in America—escape it he cannot—it is an American tree.

Render that in pigment and he asserts his own existence and that of men about him—he becomes prophet and seer—so far as he is wholly worthy to be so. (72)

Williams echoes here his by-now-familiar sentiments about the importance of local contact that allows the poet to define a uniquely “American tree.”<sup>58</sup> Significant here, as

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<sup>58</sup> For Williams, the national implications of this type of contact were paramount for advancing an American artistic tradition. In starting the magazine *Contact* with Robert McAlmon in 1920, he promoted native artists who could give voice to multiple experiences of contact with the American landscape. Although *Contact* had irregular publications from December 1920 through July 1923, Williams’s work as

well, is his emphasis on a larger form of contact, which can inspire connection to the “men about him,” or the broader culture in which the artist lives. The resulting thing expresses universal experiences of a culture. These notions certainly carry Romantic implications regarding the poet’s function as a prophet who can benefit his peer’s perception of themselves, their landscapes, and nation. But the “universal” aspects with which readers can identify are the human experiences of interaction. For this reason, Williams warns readers not to discount the local as too provincial or parochial:

It is because we confuse the narrow sense of parochialism in its limiting implication, that we fail to see the complement of the same: that the local in a full sense *is* the freeing agency to all thought, in that it is everywhere accessible to all: not in the temple, of a class, but for every place where men have eyes, brains, vigor and the desire to partake with others of that same variant in other *places* which unites us all—if we are able. (71)

Focusing on local experience as a process of object interaction can provide access to universal forms of experience, the “eyes, brains, vigor” Williams cites above, across cultures and even generations. As he states in his essay on “Kenneth Burke,” “One has to learn what the meaning of the local is, for universal purposes. The local is the only thing that is universal. . . . The classic is the local fully realized, words marked by a place” (*SE* 132). By “fully realizing” one’s experience in the localities of place, one can gain a form of knowledge that is universal. In *Spring and All*, Williams describes this experience as

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editor overlapped, for at least some periods, with his composition of *Spring and All*. In *the hieroglyphics of a new speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1969), Bram Dijkstra posits that Williams’s ideas on contact were inspired by American visual artists, in particular photographer Alfred Stieglitz who presented a focus on objects in *Camera Work* and *291*, as well as the short-lived *The Seven Arts*. Stieglitz promoted the object as thing-unto-itself—and a uniquely American thing at that—as well as a thing through which the artist could capture his emotional experience. This dual focus on the object through both an objective and subjective lens is something we find in Williams’s work, as well.

“an enlargement before great or good [art] work, an expansion” that “gives the feeling of completion by revealing the oneness of experience” (*I* 107). A reader may recognize his own emotions reflected in the work of art; but more so, representation can inspire a reader to recognize even previously-unconscious aspects of existence. The thing becomes a reflection of emotion, as well as a catalyst for emotional recognition. As Bram Dijkstra points out, “Objects, in this manner, became a link between the person and universal states of being, the means whereby the person, through the mediating work of the artist, came to recognize the nature and universality of his own emotions” (*RI* 7).

Williams’s concept of the local elevates the poet’s individual experience and thus seems to demand less of the “continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (53) T.S. Eliot advocates in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” There, Eliot claims that poetry “is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality,” although he acknowledges that “of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (58). The poem must present what he calls “*significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (59). He continues, “The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.” The poet’s representation must universalize experience in order to make it “impersonal” and “significant”; by surrendering personal experience to the larger experience of the poem, he elevates that work to a place in “tradition.” For Williams, on the other hand, the local begins with the artist’s connection to his environment; to explore the local is to incorporate the emotional and sensual experiences that push the poem beyond mere observation. Williams requires a different kind of surrender in which the

poet commits to articulating his unique experience of the object world. Yet, Williams, too, aspires for this more personal representation to prompt connection to universal realms or, perhaps more precisely, emotional experiences with which all readers can identify.

Developing a clear distinction between the poetic theories of Williams and Eliot is important not only for outlining modernist trends, but also for understanding how Williams consciously positions himself against Eliot in pursuing a new notion of “culture.” In a May 5, 1944, letter to Horace Gregory, Williams frames his poetics as a direct response to Eliot’s notion of high culture as removed from the poet’s locality and rooted instead in intellectual institutions of literary tradition or Christianity:

It is the poet who lives locally, and whose senses are applied no way else than locally to particulars, who is the agent and the maker of all culture. It is the poet’s job and the poet lives on the job, on the location. But if the head, the intellect, on which he rightfully calls for direction, contemns him, fails to leave a friendly channel open for him but blocks him off—then dynamite is the only thing that will open that channel again. (*SL* 225-226)

Williams privileges the artist writing out of his local experience and particulars as the kind that will present a new form of “culture.” He distinguishes this more physically-engaged experience from intellectual experience that disconnects the artist from actual contact with the world. The “dynamite” he calls for to reopen the channels of perception is the imagination—experience gained through consciousness, sensuous engagement, and emotional intensity. Williams further counters Eliot: “There has to be a recognition by the

intellectual heads (Eliot among them) of the work-a-day local culture of the United States. In fact, there can be no general culture unless it is bedded, as he says, in a locality—something I have been saying for a generation: there is no universal except in the local” (224). Williams argues for a notion of culture that springs from the “work-a-day” experiences of subjects. He makes a similar point in his *Autobiography*, again emphasizing the “particulars” of one’s experience as the catalyst for the universal: “That is the poet’s business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal” (391). Williams’s analogy of the doctor working intensely on a patient illustrates the physicality of this exchange, orchestrated through contact with an individual body and requiring the physician’s complete surrender to that interaction. This form of attentive care allows the poet to discover, and accordingly reveal, humanity; the poet-physician (two jobs held by Williams himself) offers the patient healing by providing access to universal knowledge of human existence.

In a sense, then, Williams’s concept of the universal positions him more closely to Eliot’s philosophy than perhaps he might have thought. He outlines a use of objects that is similar to Eliot’s objective correlative, as Eliot defines that term: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (“Hamlet and His Problems” 101).<sup>59</sup> As I described in

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<sup>59</sup> Admittedly, I am reading this connection between Williams and Eliot against Williams himself, who was vigorously outspoken in his disdain for Eliot’s poetics. His unfavorable opinion of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) is well known, a poem he describes in his *Autobiography* as “the great catastrophe to our letters” (146). With its emphasis on allusion and European tradition, Eliot’s poetics undermined the very essence of Williams’s focus on the local. Williams describes, “Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once I was defeated” (174).

my Introduction, Eliot's goal is to universalize the poet's emotion by shifting it away from the author's personality and experience, and employing a more "objective" means of prompting the intended emotion within the reader. The objective correlative can represent the poet's emotion, thus allowing the poet to resist expounding on feelings in the manner of the high Romantics. Yet, the poem must attain the realm of "universality"—for both Eliot and Williams—in order for the reader to forge a genuine connection. The universal becomes a means of accessing experiences that are common to poet and reader alike. So while Williams does not offer a precise definition of the universal—classifying it rather vaguely in *Spring and All* and "French Painting" as knowledge—it is clear that he intends this concept to incorporate aspects of human knowledge and emotion that can engender the reader's identification and contact.

Just as I pointed out in my earlier critique of Eliot, this process of choosing an objective correlative, or, in Williams's case, of using the local object to access universal knowledge or emotion, is by no means an automatic process. It is Williams's acknowledgment of this point, his struggle to create sparse poems that can meet these ambitious standards, that provide the locus point of preoccupation about his poetic function. The objects themselves, via the poet's directed and self-conscious technical choices, become the best means through which to locate and explore such feelings.

For example, in the poem numbered "IX" in *Spring and All*, objects become projections of the poet's emotional state in a manner similar to objective correlatives. In this case, the poem details the subject's experience of his affair with "O 'Kiki' / O Miss

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Nevertheless, while Williams may have responded to Eliot's scholarly turn by asserting an alternative poetics—and, indeed, published *Spring and All* the following year as the embodiment of that poetics—it does not preclude the possibility of similarities between both poets' use of the object/objective correlative for granting the reader access to some embedded emotion.

Margaret Jarvis” (*I* 113)—a disguised name for a nurse Williams worked with in 1907 at the New York French Hospital. The objects with which the lovers interact during the affair become witnesses to the experience:

In my life the furniture eats me  
the chairs, the floor  
the walls  
which heard your sobs  
drank up my emotion—  
they which alone know everything  
and snitched on us in the morning— (113-114)

Objects in the poem literally consume the subject; the furniture and walls soak up his emotional condition and stand to “snitch” details the poet otherwise leaves unarticulated. While Williams resists explaining his precise emotional experience, the objects reveal a tumultuous, passionate, and yet destructive relationship in which “windows, chairs” become “obscenely drunk, spinning—white, blue, orange—hot with our passion” (114). Even stable objects are destabilized amidst overwhelming emotions. The subject records “broken/ stockings, shoes, hairpins/ your bed, I wrapped myself round you”: he is just another damaged or strewn physical object his lover can display or discard, as one would an item of clothes. In another metaphor he claims, “I was your nightgown/ I watched!” as “you sobbed, you beat your pillow/ you tore your hair/ you dug your nails into your sides” (115). Despite the couple’s physical closeness, the speaker remains emotionally distant from Kiki; he can neither console her nor stop her anger and pain. Rather, he is left to watch “the broken pieces of the city—flying apart at his approaches// but I merely/ caress you curiously// fifteen years ago...” In a poem in which the speaker expresses a sense of alienation and powerlessness amidst such intense emotions, in which he himself

has been likened to a mere object (the nightgown) with little human agency, it proves significant that Williams begins the poem with the question, “What about all this writing?” What can the writing accomplish fifteen years later when the poet can merely “caress [the experience] curiously”? Kiki remains a mystery, a lover the subject could never emotionally penetrate or understand. Exploring this intense experience, in hindsight, through a catalog of physical objects allows the subject, with some measure of critical distance, to communicate emotions he himself seems not to have yet resolved. Throughout, Kiki remains intangible, both to Williams and the reader, even as the poem reveals the couple’s intense emotional history. The objects remain limited in how much of the speaker’s feelings they can communicate, but a universal experience is nonetheless on display: the speaker’s confusion, nostalgia, isolation and curiosity in the aftermath of a tumultuous affair now stilled—in all its destabilized and dizzying details—into memory.

In other writings Williams seems to recognize, as we saw in “O Kiki,” that poetry may be limited in the knowledge it can convey; nevertheless, he still considers it the optimal medium to pursue contact with the local and, in turn, the universal. As he wrote in an April 12, 1950, letter, “The poem . . . is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression . . . . The poem . . . is the assertion that we are alive as ourselves—as much of the environment as it can grasp” (*SL* 286). The poet can assert “a new a total culture” by elevating the subject’s individual existence (“we are alive as ourselves”) and granting humanity greater self-knowledge. But Williams is also aware of the subject’s potential limitations in expressing knowledge, for there may only be so much “of the environment as [the subject] can grasp.” Here, we

find the roots of a tension manifested in the juxtaposing poetry and prose of *Spring and All* between what the poem aspires to do in forging universal communication and what it can actually deliver. This preoccupation explains Williams's need in the prose to assert a clear agenda for the imagination and thus for poetry itself, which he claims "has to do with ... the perfection of new forms as additions to nature" (140).

In fact, Williams establishes clear goals for both the poetry and prose:

prose has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form. This is the force of the imagination.

prose: statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts—technical expositions, jargon, of all sorts—fictional and other—

poetry: new form dealt with as reality itself (I 133)

While Williams's language often falls into abstractions in the prose—accounting for the difficulty one may have in reconciling his commitment to renew language with his use of abstractions such as "local," "universal," "reality," and "science"—he reserves poetry as a space in which to reanimate language and, in the process, renew the reader's perception. This process creates a "new form" altogether; the resulting thing becomes a new "fact" that supersedes its existence as an actual object: "It is the jump from prose to the process of the imagination that is the next great leap of intelligence—from simulations of present experience to the facts of the imagination" (133-134). Certainly, these claims seem to support J. Hillis Miller's idea of the poem as elevated to its own existence, residing in some realm that is "a space both subjective and objective, a region of copresence in which anywhere is everywhere, and all times are one" (Miller 288). If

poetry, via the imagination, fosters the creation of things so they become new forms of reality, this realm may appear to exist beyond the life of the poet who has enacted the creations. However, in the case of *Spring and All*, the poems spring from the same subject advocating in the prose a relationship to objects that can capture authentic human experience. It is helpful to recall that Williams's concept of the universal differs from Miller's notion of the "beautiful thing" precisely because he does not pursue some essence of the object that is pre-social, pre-linguistic, or pre-human. Instead, what the poems often reveal is a poet struggling to reconcile divergent impulses: to capture the particular, local experiences of a subject, but also to reveal some universal essence of knowledge that can inspire human contact beyond that individual subject.

The poems of *Spring and All* reflect this tension over precisely when, and how, the local becomes the universal, in part, because Williams's treatment of objects emphasizes less the process of the object's transformation than it does the result—the thing. If we compare this focus to that in Robert Frost's "The Generations of Men," discussed in Chapter One, it becomes clear why readers such as Miller have identified Williams's objects as residing in a realm unto themselves, disconnected from the speaker. In Frost's poem, a man and woman sit around a cellar hole, and through their dialogue, model the very process by which subjects project versions of meaning onto encountered objects. The poem stages a metanarrative illustrating the object transformation and involving the exploration of imagination, myth, allusion, description, metaphor, and phonetic linguistic play. Williams, however, tends to elide the process by which his speakers jump into the imagination; instead, he often renders the object in some descriptive form (as we saw in the red wheelbarrow poem), but in a manner that leaves

out an explicit narrative of the subject's encounter. Rather, the way the object comes into being as a thing—or takes on particular ideas and meanings for the speaker—is documented through more subtle techniques in form of the poem itself, such as the poet's word choice, syntax, enjambment, and other technical arrangements. Less intent on capturing the speaker's personality, Williams's poems nonetheless record the subject's experience of interaction, illustrating how the subject invests particular meanings in the object's transformation.

A useful poem to illustrate Williams's approach to this transformation is the untitled poem beginning, "The rose is obsolete" (later titled "The Rose") (I 107). Based on the Juan Gris painting *Flowers* (1914), the poem does not explore contact with an actual rose, but rather with another artist's rendering of that object. Although we have seen Marianne Moore make a regular practice of examining objects that are, in fact, art objects already representing transformed "things," this is not a common technique in *Spring and All*. Williams's explicit consideration of the act of representation proves significant here, as he explores how the artist makes meaning through the artistic process. Williams examines the rose, in part, for its preexisting value as a thing he must renew. Thus, he must first deconstruct the object's "thingness"—and the associations it carries in existing art—in order to explore more actual experiences of meaning. In the prose section preceding the poem, Williams explains his fondness for Gris as an artist who encapsulates a "modern trend": "the attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him" (107). Like Gris, Williams wants his universal thing to transcend local experience, but to do so in a way that promotes the

reader's connection. He later credits Gris with focusing on "Things with which he is familiar, simple things—at the same time [detaching] them from ordinary experience to the imagination" (110).

This attention to detaching the object from its local or "ordinary" experience helps explain Williams's habit of defamiliarizing the reader's contact by examining the object through fragmentation and irregular syntax. Through such techniques he pushes the reader to find new meanings beyond the object's preexisting associations of symbolic or use value. Williams announces this aim in the opening lines:

The rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge, the double facet  
cementing the grooved  
columns of air—The edge  
cuts without cutting  
meets—nothing—renews  
itself in metal and porcelain—

Whither? It ends— (107)

Describing the rose, first, as "obsolete," Williams acknowledges it as an outmoded symbol containing pre-existing "illusions"—a term he defines in the prose as resulting "where ignorance of the bystander confuses imagination and its works with cruder processes." Instead, Williams presents the rose through the actual conditions in which he finds it; through this more authentic depiction the object "renews/ itself." Thus, Williams suggests that objects can be re-examined to find new qualities of meaning:

But if it ends  
the start is begun  
so that to engage roses  
becomes a geometry—

Sharper, neater, more cutting  
figured in majolica—

the broken plate  
glazed with a rose

Somewhere the sense  
makes copper roses  
steel roses— (108)

Williams's mention here of geometry is significant, since geometry is a branch of mathematics dealing with relationships between bodies in space. It seeks to gather the measurements and forms of objects through the deduction of certain assumed properties. But geometry of any space, whether finite or indefinite, remains about point of view and perspective point. Here, Williams suggests a process of studying the object's form, its relation in space, in order to gain fuller understanding of its properties; the artist can only embark on such a question from the particular vantage point of his contact. Thus, Williams records the relation of the rose to the other objects in the painting, the earthenware plate that appears "glazed with a rose" because of the placement that blurs the objects together.

At this point, the description becomes less about the actual rose (as depicted in Gris's painting) than what the poet's "sense/ makes" of the object: a rose that appears as copper, only to be transformed into steel. Williams then embarks on an exploration of the main association the object carries:

The rose carried weight of love  
but love is at an end—of roses

If is at the edge of the  
petal that love waits

Crisp, worked to defeat  
laboredness—fragile  
plucked, moist, half-raised  
cold, precise, touching (108)

The rose as a symbol often carries ideas of love, but here Williams announces that love “is at an end—of roses”—in other words, his thing does not inherently contain love, although love may exist “at the edge of the/ petal,” or may still be projected onto the rose from the outside. The dash in this line suggests that any association between love and roses has been unnaturally—though intentionally—conjoined; Williams has now separated this idea through the visual break. Having stripped the object of its “thingness,” Williams goes on to explore its actual conditions, as depicted by Gris. In doing so, he acknowledges the “laboredness” of the thing, the rose as a construction that has been “plucked” and “half-raised.” Williams studies intersections between Gris’s rose and the surrounding objects in the painting and finds the rose “precise” and “cold” in its relation.

However, in the final stanzas Williams moves beyond geometric description of the object’s physical properties and relations and begins to consider more metaphysical values. In particular, he focuses on the object’s permanence and strength, revealing the qualities this speaking subject is most concerned about:

The place between the petal’s  
edge and the

From the petal’s edge a line starts  
that being of steel  
infinitely fine, infinitely  
rigid penetrates  
the Milky Way  
without contact—lifting  
from it—neither hanging  
nor pushing— (108-109)

Williams reaches an impasse in his exploration of the rose’s geometry; he cannot articulate what exists between the petal’s edge and the surrounding landscape, in part because the painting’s representation does not extend there. As we saw in “Portrait of the

Artist,” he preserves the poet’s frustrations in the poetic space, revealing the challenge of authoritatively delineating the rose’s relation to other things. Beyond the object’s status as a painted image, Williams seems to be asking, how does it inspire contact with the larger universe? How does it forge connections beyond itself? What is “hanging”—or “depending”—on it? The description conveys an interest in the rose’s permanence and strength: the external form of the rose, the lines that mark its boundaries, become lines of steel penetrating into space. It again proves significant that Williams considers such ideas about the larger uses of art through an object already made permanent in Gris’s painting. Nevertheless, although Williams celebrates the potential of art, qualities of strength and permanence are not certainties of the artist’s process. Williams ends the poem commenting on the rose’s vulnerability, rather than its power or force: “The fragility of the flower/ unbruised/ penetrates space.” He recognizes the rose as fragile and fleeting; in classifying it as unbruised, Williams suggests awareness of an inevitable, forthcoming state of bruising and decay. These fragilities evoke the rose in Moore’s “Roses Only,” whose self-protective thorns serve as the catalyst for the object’s transformation. In Moore’s poem, the poet gains possession by recognizing the thorns as a form of armor that can mask vulnerabilities and allow the poet to gain a stance of authoritative distance. In Williams’s poem, even as he recognizes human concerns over vulnerability and impermanence (conditions over which the rose itself would not be preoccupied), the fleeting object becomes a complete and permanent thing through which others can now access to its potential universality. Here, we see Williams, like Moore, taking up issues of poetic authority in the achieved thing.

Ultimately, the poem demonstrates the very process by which Williams has enacted the object's transformation: by engaging in geometric study and consideration; by stripping the object of previous associations and attending to its actual conditions; and by resolving certain poetic preoccupations inherent in the representation. Although the rose, for some, may still be about love, the speaker's engagement reveals his concerns over its impermanence and fragility, even as he uses language to categorize it as copper, steel, metal, and porcelain. This concentration relates back to Williams's sense of his poetic function and his concern with transforming the fleeting local encounter into something permanent and universal. In fact, we find, he has staged this very conflict in his consideration of the rose. The universal emotion conveyed in the final lines is an elegiac impulse that recognizes vulnerability and decline, particularly in the face of a vast, overwhelming universe, and yet pursues art as the means of overcoming these conditions. In the end, even the speaker's "cold" geometric gaze upon the object has brought him to invest a deeply human response in the thing.

Another poem illustrating a tension between objectivity and subjectivity in the subject's transition between local and universal experience, is the poem numbered "X" (later titled "The Eyeglasses"), which addresses more directly the act of perception. Williams begins by informing the reader that the "universality of things" has propelled the speaker's act of observation:

The universality of things  
draws me toward the candy  
with melon flowers that open

about the edge of refuse  
proclaiming without accent  
the quality of the farmer's

shoulders and his daughter's  
accidental skin, so sweet  
with clover and the small

yellow cinquefoil in the  
parched places. It is  
this that engages the favorable

distortion of eyeglasses  
that see everything and remain  
related to mathematics— (117-118)

Just as Williams described in his praise of Juan Gris, this speaker focuses on simple, ordinary objects encountered in the landscape—a piece of candy thrown upon the ground, a humble farmer and his daughter, a small yellow flower growing in a dried patch of dirt. These are objects made beautiful only in the artist's representation, what Williams calls "the favorable/ distortion of eyeglasses" that sees all and yet "remain[s]/ related to mathematics." His attention again to mathematics suggests his desire to achieve an objective gaze that can recognize in local objects their optimal redemptive (and universalizing) potential. Engaging objects through a mathematical perspective becomes closely related to the act of writing, given Williams's abrupt interruption of a description of the eyeglass frames (the "practical frame/ of brown celluloid") with the mention of "A letter from the man who/ wants to start a new magazine/ made of linen// and he owns a typewriter—/ July 1, 1922." Although the existence of an actual letter cannot be known, this date corresponds with Williams's own work as editor of *Contact*, the journal in which he was promoting the type of engaged local contact depicted in the poem. Williams goes on to remind readers that the poet's enlightened perspective can promote enhanced vision of the landscape: "All this is for eyeglasses/ to discover."

Yet, the final lines of the poem have proven puzzling for readers and, in their opacity, illustrating the limitations—and even undesirability—of objectivity in the speaker’s presentation. Williams now describes the glasses, which he claimed above embody the ideal mathematical perspective, through a seemingly private and somewhat illogical metaphor alluding to Peru’s Lake Titicaca, a specific local ground: “But/ they lie there with the gold/ earpieces folded down// tranquilly Titicaca—.” After presenting a set of images at the poem’s start reflecting “the universality of things”—plain objects made dazzling in the poet’s thoughtful consideration—he now turns to an image that is notable not for what it reveals about the glasses, but for the way it thwarts the readers’ access to any kind of clear meaning. Instead, we get a set of lines distinguished by their internal rhyme and alliteration, and a final image that betrays little more than, perhaps, the speaker’s personal associations with the locality of one of South America’s largest lakes or his affinity for a certain phonetic pattern of sounds in this “jump” into the imagination (“tranquilly Titicaca”). The poem embodies, once again, the tension between the poet’s individual experience of, and response to, the local, versus his goals for achieving some realm of the universal. The reader is left, ultimately, with a chance to consider the impact of both concepts. The mathematical precision of the poem’s early descriptions allows the reader to recognize significant qualities of beauty and vulnerability within what may otherwise be forgettable objects. But the poem also succeeds by making the reader aware of the poet’s individual experience as he wrestles with language, memory, and perspective in his enormous task of “universalizing” local experience and transforming objects into things.

Ultimately, the poetics of *Spring and All* serve as an important example of a modernist poet exploring the subject's relationship to the object to gain greater recognition of human experience. In the process, Williams exposes certain tensions over how the poet can render things to create universal forms of experience through which all readers can gain access. Whether Williams always succeeds in creating things that transcend local experience is something, as we have seen, even he would acknowledge can be debated. Certainly, his abstract concept of a "universal" makes it difficult to particularize about the universalizing values or "ideas" that come out of his specific localities. Nevertheless, Williams promotes this form of object contact—via the imagination—to alter the very priorities of his culture: to elevate human experience and inspire a communal sense that human emotions and conditions can be universalized and shared. Williams presents the poet as serving a vital function in this moment of the early twentieth century. Much like his American poetic Emerson and Walt Whitman, who both envision the poet as an essential national figure, Williams positions the poet as a "seer" whose enhanced perception can restore isolated modern subjects to a place of shared values; in the process, the poet can "[assert] his own existence and that of men about him" ("French Painting" 72).

## Chapter Four: “The Sequence of Disclosure”: The Truth Hidden in Things in George Oppen’s *Discrete Series*

In his most-extensive essay on prosody, “The Mind’s Own Place” (1963), George Oppen reflects on “Modern American poetry” as a movement defined by its “determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and color of our lives” (30). Oppen acknowledges the power of “things” to shape the subject’s knowledge of itself and of modern existence. For Oppen, this trend reflects a new model of prosody: unlike previous generations of poets, for whom verse “had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation,” modern poetry was “to the modernists a skill of accuracy, or precision, a test of truth”—a movement eschewing false rhetorical devices in favor of concrete description: “The data was and is the core of what ‘modernism’ restored to poetry, the sense of the poet’s self among things. So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow” (32). Living “among things” demands an exploration of the subject’s relations to modern objects; in terms of poetics, this requires the poet to find new techniques that will grant access to the “truth” at the center of the “thing.” In depicting encounters with objects, the modern poet can test perception to gain what Oppen calls “that rare poetic quality of truthfulness.”

While William Carlos Williams focuses on a poetics of things that can reveal some transcultural and transhistorical form of “universal” knowledge, Oppen explores things to expose a subject testing his relations to materials—relations he historicizes by evaluating the object through particular social and political conditions. And while Williams also uses the local particulars of contact to pursue universal truths, asserting the poet’s authority, via the imagination, to renew objects into things, Oppen proves more

hesitant about the gains his form of object study can achieve. His technical experimentations with syntax frequently underscore the challenges of achieving some final “truth” over meaning. In contrast to Williams’s confidence in the universal, Oppen proves to be more pragmatic, recognizing that issues of language and perception, as well as certain modern conditions, may prevent the poet from transforming the object into a universal “thing” (in Bill Brown’s sense of that term) through which all readers can access some meaning. Oppen’s hesitations manifest his own preoccupation with poetic authority and the efficacy of poetry in a particular moment of modernity. Where a Williams poem may present the thing defined, foregoing a representation of the subject’s process of interaction and creation, Oppen instead addresses this very process, using the poem to test the subject’s relations to surrounding materials and thus examining the process by which subjects can come to know objects—and themselves. Oppen focuses less on the results of this process, the created “thing,” and more on the test itself.

In this chapter, I focus on Oppen’s first book, *Discrete Series* (1934), a sequence of experimental poems featuring largely urban landscapes of San Francisco and New York. Oppen titled early drafts of the book “The 1930s,” suggesting his interest in recording the conditions of these landscapes in the midst of the Great Depression. After completing *Discrete Series*, he joined the Communist party and put down his pen for the next 24 years, investing instead in political activities. His extended silence suggests a sense of disillusionment over the value of art in the face of such extreme conditions. As he later wrote, “The catastrophe of human lives in the thirties...seemed to me to put poetry and the purposes of poetry in question” (*SL* 186). In 1968 Oppen elaborated in an interview with L.S. Dembo:

I think it was fifteen million families that were faced with the threat of immediate starvation. It wasn't a business one simply read about in the newspaper. You stepped out your door and found men who had nothing to eat. I'm not moralizing now—and I've been through this before—but for some people it was simply impossible not to do something. I've written an essay that appeared in *Kulchur* 10<sup>60</sup> in which I explained that I didn't believe in political poetry or poetry as being politically efficacious. I don't even believe in the honesty of a man saying, "Well, I'm a poet and I will make my contribution to the cause by writing poems about it." I don't believe that's any more honest than to make wooden nutmegs because you happen to be a woodworker. If you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy. And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering. That was the dilemma of the 'thirties. In a way I gave up poetry because of the pressures of what for the moment I'll call conscience. (CL 174)

Peter Nicholls has called Oppen's crisis in the 1930s one over "the fundamental incompatibility between the aesthetic and the political" ("The New or the Avant-Garde?" 3), with Oppen concluding he could not satisfy his poetic and political aims through the same course of action. He spent the remainder of the decade working for the Communist

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<sup>60</sup> Oppen is referring here to "The Mind's Own Place," from which I have quoted above. This essay was first published in *Kulchur* 3, no. 10, in the Summer 1963 issue. Oppen writes:

There are situations which cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning. If one goes on to imagine a direct call for help, then surely to refuse it would be a kind of treason to one's neighbors. Or so I think. But the bad fiddling could hardly help, and similarly the question can only be whether one intends, at a given time, to write poetry or not. (36)

party and, later, serving as an infantryman in World War II. In the face of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee, he spent eight years in Mexico and did not begin another poem until 1958.

Any decision Oppen made over the value and necessity of his varying forms of labor came after completion of *Discrete Series*. Thus, this early book becomes essential to consider, because it records a moment of the poet's unresolved concerns over issues of poetic function, efficacy, and authority, precisely as he meditates on the subject's relationship to worldly materials. In *Discrete Series*, Oppen deconstructs objects that have come to define modern existence and, in that process, exposes the belief systems lurking within them that shape—and too often limit—the subject's knowledge of its own conditions. Thus, Oppen takes apart the object to reveal what gets hidden within it—or, as he describes this material in an unnamed car poem, to find the “obscured/ origin” (*NCP 8*) concealed within the thing.

Through his particular form of object study, Oppen mines for “truth” within the materials, modeling a stance of inquiry readers must also employ as they look for meaning within the poems—and interact with their own object world. When Oppen calls for “truthfulness” at the center of things, he demands a more conscious understanding of the subject's relations to external objects. Admittedly, this concept of “truth” poses a problem, particularly for a poet so committed to concrete materials, as the title of his next book, *The Materials* (1962), suggests. An examination of things within *Discrete Series* reveals a particular kind of “truth” Oppen seeks to expose: the poems continually return to the truth in objects that gets hidden before our eyes, most frequently through interaction with objects of modern technology, such as a car, an elevator shaft, or a

refrigerator. In the process, Oppen reveals the subject's diminished sense of agency in relation to these technologies, as well as his alienation from natural objects that have become unreal and strange. The things of *Discrete Series* help expose conditions of labor, sexual power relations, and social ideologies that have limited the subject's knowledge of its own conditions. Overwhelmed by the way modern technological materials have shaped experience—with the speaking subject in several poems recording existence from inside these objects—Oppen pursues a poetics that can more authentically represent the subject's experience of interaction. In "The Mind's Own Place," he emphasizes the importance of pushing beyond "political generalizations": "It is not to say that the poet is immune to the 'real' world to say that he is not likely to find the moment, the image, in which a political generalization or any other generalization will prove its truth" (32). Perception via "that rare poetic quality of truthfulness" must see beyond the ideologies limiting the subject's interpretation. Through experimental syntax that frequently defamiliarizes everyday objects, Oppen unsettles the reader's relationship to the materials under study and thus forces a reexamination.

In this chapter, I consider "things" in relation to ideas of Marxist materialism because these ideas informed Oppen's understanding of the material world, as well as his approach to objects in *Discrete Series*.<sup>61</sup> Although Marxism can be criticized as a form of ideology that reveals its own version of "truth," it proves useful for analyzing Oppen's object focus because it provides a method of reading objects. Further, Oppen was explicit

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<sup>61</sup> This is not to suggest that Oppen's writing reflects the aims of the Communist Party. In fact, as Eric Homberger notes, the Left had little patience with Objectivist poetics because of its resistance to make class struggle its single rhetorical aim. Homberger writes, "the term 'Objectivism' was a damaging confession of neutrality" (114). Further, as we have already heard from Oppen, the poet was hesitant to use art to advance overtly political arguments. He told Dembo, "I didn't believe in political poetry or poetry as being politically efficacious. . . . If you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy. And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or you deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering" (Dembo, *CL* 174).

about the book's connection to Marxist ideas. In a 1973 letter, he described the book as Marxist in its aims, explaining, "The 'Marxism' of *Discrete Series* is, was felt as, the struggle against the loss of the commonplace" (SL 254).<sup>62</sup> This "loss of the commonplace" corresponds to the modern subject's sense of estrangement from external objects. Lyn Hejinian describes this experience as "the loss of the materialist attention to the practice of everyday life, 'the real individuals,' as Marx says, 'their activity, and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity'" (53).<sup>63</sup> By emphasizing real-world conditions of workers, Hejinian identifies the source of Oppen's loss as modernity's diminished focus on the subject and its corresponding elevation of materials.

On this point Marx proves useful to consider through his own theories on the object. The ultimate object for Marx—the commodity—carries within it what in *Capital* he calls a "secret": "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (163). Marx's concept of the "fetishism of the commodity" reveals tremendous depths of what remains hidden within the object: the whole system of production that created the commodity, including the structures and relations of power, the social characteristics of labor, and the value relations of that

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<sup>62</sup> In this same letter, Oppen focuses on the political pragmatism of Marxism, telling his correspondent, John Crawford, "John: your marxism is too 'scholarly' Marx's books are Marx's books, but the Marxist political parties are ways to relieve the suffering, and simple ways they are, or they are abominations--- are or will become so - - IF they are not, to get the dams built, to save the people---" (255). He goes on to credit Crawford for recognizing the political pragmatism evident even in *Discrete Series*: "BUT JOHN, DESPITE THE TESTINESS ABOVE, I AM GRATEFUL TO YOU FOR THE RECOGNITION THAT FROM DISCRETE SERIES TO THE MARXISM WAS NOT A 'BREAK'----- BY ANY MEANS." Here Oppen seems to confirm, as I have been suggesting, that *Discrete Series* promotes pragmatic aims in modeling how readers can apply this form of inquiry to their own encounters with materials.

<sup>63</sup> Hejinian takes this quote from Marx's "Thesis on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977: 160.

commodity. The commodity's material structure is perceived as "a physical relation between physical things"—merely a physical object among others—yet within this form, Marx asserts, lays a more complicated story:

As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (165)

As complex social relations remain concealed in the commodity, the object becomes little more than a physical exterior with no connection to the human relations of labor that contributed to its production. To view the commodity through such a limited—and false—perception proves a form of fetishism that Marx compares to “[taking] flight into the misty realm of religion.” Instead, Marx invites us to reconsider the social characteristics of labor that contributed to the commodity's creation. In effect, Marx provides a poetic take on objects in his characterization of the commodity as a type of metonymy, albeit one in which the object's form hides the larger systems embedded in its parts.

Oppen, as well, is interested in seeing beyond false relations to objects that have limited the subject's perception. And Oppen, like Marx, develops a way of reading objects to locate meanings embedded within them. I do not mean to imply here that Oppen's interest in objects relates only to this particular aspect of commodity fetishism—although I do think such a reading is evident at times within *Discrete Series*—but rather

to expose the potential for what a poetry of “truth” stands to recover. As Bill Brown acknowledges, “The rhetorical force [of Marx’s argument in *Capital*] of the declared and richly described mystery lies in its capacity to convince us that there is truth—the whole truth of Capital understood as a system—lurking at the bottom of the mystery, lingering there, right there in the commodity” (*SOT* 29). If the poet can uncover the ideologies lurking within objects, he can forge a more truthful relationship in their transformation, via the poem, into things.

### **Oppen’s Objectivism as a Modernist Poetics of Things**

To date, Oppen’s work has not been widely read through traditional narratives of modernism. *Discrete Series* arrived more than a decade after Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), and Williams’s *Spring and All* (1923), at a moment when some critics suggest modernism was already beginning to wane.<sup>64</sup>

Associated with Objectivist poets Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff, Oppen more frequently figures into critical conversations of work after modernism, as part of a lineage bridging the generations between the Imagists of the teens and the Black Mountain poets of the 1950s. In addition, Oppen’s 25-year silence following *Discrete Series* has complicated his place in critical genealogies, and his increasing experimentation, culminating with *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972), *Myth of the Blaze* (1972-1975), and *Primitive* (1978), has made him a predecessor frequently cited among the Language

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<sup>64</sup> James Longenbach points out that even by the 1930s, many American poets felt they were responding to Modernism in the creation of a postmodern aesthetic:

As early as the 1930s, Modernism seemed to such poets as Randall Jarrell (born in 1914) to be a thing of the past—something to which they could respond to but in which they could no longer participate. “Who could have believed that modernism would collapse so fast?” asked Jarrell in “The End of the Line” (1942), an essay that remains one of the subtlest accounts of Modernism we have. Even at this early date, modern poetry looked to Jarrell as it appears to us today—squeezed on the one side by its romantic precursors and on the other by its postmodern inheritors. (“Modern Poetry” 100-101)

School poets and other experimental postmodernists.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, Oppen outlines a form of prosody, as well as a concept of poetic “things,” corresponding to the object/thing distinction I have been exploring through contemporary thing theory; thus, he participates in a poetic tradition similar to that of the other modernists examined in this study. It is important to note that, like Williams, Oppen does not employ terminology of “objects” and “things” with the same precision of Bill Brown’s definitions. For Oppen words such as “object,” “thing” and “material” prove synonymous and represent what in Brown’s use would be the “object”—the actual material existing in the world. In Oppen’s poetics, the Brownian “thing,” or the artist’s resulting creation, is the Objectivist poem he produces: the poem that has become its own object, and which can be evaluated for meanings beyond the actual materials that may constitute its subject matter. As Oppen engages material objects to test meaning, he uses the form of the poem to strip outdated meanings and gain a more informed perception. Yet, the resulting Objectivist “things” of Oppen’s early poetics—difficult poems whose fragmented forms frequently challenge the reader’s interpretive practices—reflect the poet’s sense of struggle as he pursues understanding of relations to modern materials. In exploring Oppen’s work specifically through its object focus, I argue that the poems reveal a larger preoccupation about the poet’s function at a tumultuous moment in history.

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<sup>65</sup> Of course, establishing critical genealogies is itself a highly debatable project. For example, in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (1985), Marjorie Perloff identifies Oppen as part of this post-modern lineage, but defines it as one coming out of a “Pound tradition” of twentieth-century poetry dismissing the lyric in favor of poetry as the imitation of an action (22). She identifies a rift in critical readings of modernism between Romantic expectations of the lyric and a more de-centered form of collage. Perloff includes Oppen as a link between Pound and Williams in the first half of the century, and Beckett and the Language School in the second half; thus, Oppen bridges forms of modernism and postmodernism exploring non-lyrical fragmentation. I include Perloff’s assessment to illustrate the variety of ways Oppen has been read against and in relation to his modernist contemporaries and predecessors.

As Oppen reveals in “The Mind’s Own Place,” he retroactively defined “Modern American poetry” through its attention to things—even as critics have, rightfully, pointed out his selective sidestepping of modernist trends falling outside of this focus.<sup>66</sup> And despite clear distinctions between Oppen’s poetics and that of Pound or Williams, he acknowledges their influence in his conception of a thing-based poetics. Asked for his thoughts on Williams’s well-known claim in *Paterson*, “no ideas but in things,” Oppen told Dembo:

A. I have always wondered whether that expression didn’t apply to the construction of meaning in a poem—not necessarily that there are out there no ideas but in things, but rather that there would be in the poem no ideas but those which could be expressed through the description of things. I took it that he meant the latter until I found that the expression was frequently understood in a different way.

Q. Anyway, if your interpretation of the Williams line is correct, it seems to me you would in fact partly resemble him.

A. Perhaps. (*CL* 170)

Oppen’s interpretation reveals a great deal about his own goals for exploring “things.” Within the medium of the poem, things convey the subject’s ideas. Although such ideas could be expressed through multiple techniques—such as metaphor, allusion, testimony or dialogue, as we have seen among other modernists—Oppen favors a poetics in which ideas are presented through descriptions of materials; thus, the objects of his poems must

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Nicholls finds that Oppen’s definition provides “only the most partial account of literary modernism” (*GOFM* 8), leaving out modernism’s focus on tradition, myth, and literary allusiveness, as well as the debate within the movement by figures such as Eliot and Williams over what should constitute the “data of experience.” Nicholls points out:

It is notable that while Williams famously repudiated Eliot’s traditionalism and, in doing so, proposed an alternative, American version, Oppen characteristically sidesteps the whole debate. “I felt myself to be as I found myself,” he says, a comment which demonstrates the kind of independence he felt from a “nascent canon” of modernist writings and his related sense that even in his first book he was striking out in a different direction.

Nicholls places Oppen’s poetics as falling between the two extreme forms of modernism—traditionalism and avant-gardism—in presenting an alternative “poetics of being ... that was not reducible to either a myth of the past or to stylistic experimentation masquerading as politics” (2).

be read through their relations to the subject experiencing them. Oppen describes a concern with “the substantive, with the subject of the sentence, with what we are talking about, and not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it” (161). Concrete representation supersedes subjective commentary or observation. Yet, even concrete description can convey the poet’s emotional response to interaction, since perception, Oppen claims, “is a tremendous emotional response, which fills us with the experience that we describe as seeing.... It can only be interpreted emotionally” (173). Oppen’s poetics aims to capture a “reality” deeply reflective of the human subject experiencing it, as we have now seen in the work of all the modernists in this study.

Oppen’s association with Objectivist poets Zukofsky and Reznikoff, with whom he claimed to share “a certain attitude toward poetry” (Dembo, *CL* 160), helps clarify his approach to objects as one founded in Imagism but moving beyond that earlier movement in important ways:

What I felt I was doing was beginning from imagism as a position of honesty. The first question at that time in poetry was simply the question of honesty, sincerity. But I learned from Louis [Zukofsky], as against the romanticism or even quaintness of the imagist position, the necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form. That’s what “objectivist” really means. . . . The other point for me, and I think for Louis, too, was the attempt to construct meaning, to construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry—from the imagist intensity of vision. If no one were going to challenge me, I would say, “a test of truth.” If I had to back it up I’d say anyway, “a test of sincerity”—that there is a moment, an

actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction. (160-61)

Oppen outlines a dual experience of the object that proves consistent with the ideas of contemporary thing theory, in the poet's treatment of an actual object and the resulting objectification into a separate formed thing. The achieved "objectification" through form *is* the constructed thing in Bill Brown's sense of that term: a thing carrying meanings now exceeding the original object's value. As Objectivist poets turn the poem into a poetic object (or Brownian "thing"), its form performs the required "test of truth," containing the very method through which the reader can access meaning. When Oppen acknowledges that his poetics begins from "imagist technique," he commits to Imagism's foundational principle of "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (Flint 199), via the poet's concrete representation. Yet, while Objectivists employ the same "intensity of vision," they do not pursue the object through "romanticism" or "quaintness"; in fact, Oppen's fragmented syntax and description more frequently obstruct traditional or outdated meanings associated with the object. Instead, the poet's representation of the object allows him to "construct a method of thought" that can access the "truth" underlying subject-object relations.<sup>67</sup>

In accepting Oppen's doctrine for Objectivism, it is important to understand the terminology underlying the theory. Words such as "honesty," "sincerity" and "truth" convey ambitious concepts that must be unpacked in Oppen's application. "Truth," for

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<sup>67</sup> Oppen's rejection of "romanticism" here invites us to more critically consider the connections between his poetics and romanticism, a movement in which the subject undergoes a process of change through his consideration of the external world. Because Oppen's poetics provides a method of revelation that promotes the subject's expanded recognition and transformation, one could argue that the poems reveal a hidden romanticism. Yet, even as Oppen's subject pursues "truth," he remains focused on knowledge of material existence.

Oppen, is synonymous with “sincerity,” and for Objectivists, sincerity has little to do with the ethos of the poetic speaker or its association with sentimentality. According to Zukofksy, in his 1931 essay outlining the values of the Objectivists, sincerity reflects “the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness” (273). Sincerity is the process by which the poet transforms vision into form: it is inseparable from the shape of the poem—the Objectivist’s achieved thing—where “shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound of structure, melody or form.” This type of poetry does not “create” a world or impose a particular vision of experience, but rather, by digging through the details, allows the poet to uncover the world “as it exists.” The poetic transformation can best represent such existence because the poem’s form reveals qualities that would otherwise remain hidden. As Oppen states in a *Discrete Series* poem, “People everywhere, time and the work        pauseless:/ One moves between reading and re-reading,/ The shape is a moment” (NCP 25). In “reading and rereading” the experience of “people everywhere”—and forcing an actual pause at the precise moment he highlights the monotony of modern labor, through the spatial break between “work” and “pauseless”—Oppen crafts the particular moment into a shape.

When one considers the degree of formal experimentation, the obsessive, often minute manipulations of syntax, and the careful constructing and reshaping of line, *Discrete Series* poems reflect a clear aesthetic fascination focused on rendering materials into poetic things. Yet, Oppen’s creation of the thing is less about elevating the object to some realm of aesthetic pleasure, so that the reader may admire it from a distance or

ponder the nature of its existence. Instead, his experimental techniques require a different type of involvement: the poem refuses the possibility for easy interaction. Oppen creates a space in which inquiry and revelation come through discomfort and disruption. The difficulty of encountering the poem and the effort required to read the revelation model a broader stance the reader must take toward objects in the actual world. Readers cannot accept the surfaces and must search for what remains hidden. As he states in an early Daybook,<sup>68</sup> “As human history accumulates the people come to see ‘the world as a limited whole’ [sic] That vision has no answer to it. Perhaps it is lethal” (*SPDP* 59). Human history, as it is commonly accepted, remains only a “limited” vision of reality and thus the subject cannot adequately respond to it without gaining a more expansive vision. Given what Oppen considers the potentially “lethal” nature of these conditions, the subject’s partial perception of the material world, he promotes a mode of seeing that comes by recognizing real relations between subjects and objects, as well as the ideologies and relationships of power that, too often, remain hidden in this interaction. Undoubtedly, Oppen outlines a political vision in such statements, but it, nonetheless, proves to be one underlying his approach to objects.

One such poem in which we can read political aims into the object depictions is the *Discrete Series* poem examining the garments of bourgeois women. Here, Oppen exposes how certain modern objects prove restrictive to subjects, particularly in relation to sexuality:

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<sup>68</sup> The Daybooks were a collection of notes, ideas, and prose that Oppen kept throughout the 1960s. When I cite from the Daybooks, I include editor Stephen Cope’s editorial practice of making Oppen’s corrections transparent, including passages scratched out (~~striketrough~~) and those that were later added in handwritten inscriptions (*italics* with insertion arrows, ^).

'O city ladies'  
Your coats wrapped,  
Your hips a possession

Your shoes arched  
Your walk is sharp

Your breasts  
    Pertain to lingerie

The fields are road-sides,  
Rooms outlast you. (*NCP* 29)

At first glance, this poem sounds similar to the visual imagery of a Williams poem, particularly in its emphasis on the female body. In fact, the poem is much more syntactically-straightforward than several others in *Discrete Series*. However, Oppen presents these objects—the coats, shoes, breasts—by highlighting their relations to social power structures. When he describes hips as a “possession,” the implicit question left unanswered in the line is: whose possession? When he states that the breasts “pertain to lingerie,” he again evokes the idea that breasts have a *relationship* to lingerie, but it is not necessarily a “real” or natural one. In fact, this particular description denaturalizes the sexual desire implied through the poem’s gaze. The image of lingerie, itself a form of restraint covering the body, demonstrates another mode of regulation. The poem raises the question: Who or what is regulating this desire? The social critique becomes apparent in the line, “Rooms outlast you.” Social structures prove bigger than the individual, whom they predate and will outlast. It seems pertinent to make such an observation in a poem about bourgeois women, given the poem’s attention to class as a structure that reproduces itself. The women are products of these rooms and the ideologies that support them. They are themselves objects decorating rooms, and thus the women—as objects—

epitomize the kind of perfected exterior Oppen wants to shatter in order to expose what remains hidden.

**“The sequence of disclosure”: Oppen’s form as the “test of truth”**

In previous chapters, I have identified particular techniques each poet employs in transforming objects into things, for example, in Frost’s application of metaphor, Moore’s use of formal patterns and quotation, and Williams’s frequently-enjambed accumulation of detail. Oppen also employs experimentation in his use of syntax to test the subject’s experience. As he attests, the poet’s individual use of language proves vital for validating “sincerity” and “conviction” (“The Mind’s Own Place” 32):

We cannot assert the poet’s relation to reality, nor exhort him to face reality, nor do any of these desirable things, nor be sure that we are not insisting merely that he discuss only those things we are accustomed to talk about, unless we somehow manage to restore a meaning to the word. Bertrand Russell wrote “If I were to describe reality as I found it, I would have to include my arm.” In the shock of that sentence—out of context—perhaps the meaning of the word may be restored, or in the fragment of Heraclitus: “If it all went up in smoke” that smoke would remain. It is the arbitrary fact, and not any quality of wisdom literature, which creates the impact of poets. (30)

The arbitrariness of language requires the poet to “restore a meaning to the word” before he can address “reality” in a new way. Oppen suggests that restoration of such meaning comes through recognition of the subject’s actual experience (in Bertrand Russell’s sense of a reality that incorporates the subject’s physical being). The very arbitrariness of language, which Ferdinand de Saussure defines so explicitly in structuralist theory, creates the need for poetry; the poet’s individual application of language grants his “impact.” While writers presenting “wisdom literature” may expound on intellectual ideas and philosophies, poets aware of the conditions of language must challenge the reader’s very interaction with words. Oppen recognizes that when preexisting meanings

or ideas are removed—when it “all goes up in smoke”—smoke remains: the word still exists as abstract vessel for meaning. Thus, the act of the poem, through the forms and techniques of its revelation, becomes essential for allowing new meanings to emerge. In a later Daybook,<sup>69</sup> Oppen confirms this idea:

what concerns the artist is that the thing exists—and he starts with a ruined language ^ ~~He must~~ *day by day and then by man, destroyed*^ achieves language. The trouble is that it is possible to

Must try to get back to what does exist the onta  
to language which can confront, can stand.

which is not merely a series of self-indulgent gestures, indications of attitude or sentiment.

a poem may be devoted to giving clear meaning to one word. (*SPDP* 78)

Oppen’s use of form, and in particular his use of syntax and the line, prove critical for demonstrating how his subjects interact with materiality in order to gain a more truthful vision. Yet, my attention to Oppen’s technique is not new; in fact, his radical experimentation has generated significant critical attention, and from some of the book’s earliest reviews. In his 1934 review in *Poetry*, Williams praises Oppen’s “technical excellence” and “poetical economy” (267), which he claims convey an “imaginable new social order” that “would require a skeleton of severe discipline for its realization and maintenance” (269). More recently, James Longenbach calls Oppen “one of the twentieth century’s most dazzling makers of lines”: “Reading him, it is impossible not to be aware of how, in the strategic absence of meter and rhyme, line becomes the crucial means by which a poet controls stress, intonation, and speed” (42). Michael Heller examines the form as reflecting the individual’s constant struggle for a unified sense of self in the face

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<sup>69</sup> This passage is taken from Oppen’s “Pipe-Stem Daybook,” a series of papers fastened by means of a pipe-stem cleaner and accumulated between 1962-65, according to Cope.

of a fragmentary, disjointed modern world: “Oppen’s radical use of syntax, while bordering on the disjunctive effects of much experimental poetry, never quite loses, never seems to want to lose, coherence. Rather it is a constant struggle for coherence mounted against dispersal and disintegration” (139). These three observations share the sense that Oppen’s formal experimentation reflects a poetic practice addressing the historical (and literary) conditions of his time. As Williams speaks of a poet responding to a “new social order,” he identifies “severe discipline” as the tool for realization, suggesting that the rhetorical and sentimental excesses of nineteenth-century poets are no longer sufficient for addressing the significant social transformations of modernity. Longenbach places his emphasis on formal technique as a response to the free verse of Imagism that, by the 1920s, had been watered down into visual descriptions of objects (in what many poets, including Pound and Williams, decried as “Amygism,”<sup>70</sup>). Finally, Heller examines Oppen’s response as reflective of a particular experience of alienation and fragmentation distinguishing modern subjectivity. These claims for Oppen’s technique suggest that one cannot read truth into his objects without viewing them through “human history,” to again borrow Oppen’s term from the *Daybooks*—and one he applies with clear Marxist implications.

To assess how Oppen’s technique works in its application to objects, it is helpful to consider the poet’s own insights on his prosody in his “Statement on Poetics”:

Prosody is a language, but it is a language that tests itself. Or it tests itself in music—I think one must say that. It tests the relations of things: it

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<sup>70</sup> Oppen cites this very problem in his interview with Dembo, reflecting on certain modernist poets who talk of the poem as an object: “Right. And this existed in the context of the sloppy American imagism descending out of Amy Lowell and a thousand others” (*CL* 161). Oppen clearly aimed for his own objectification to improve upon the practice of certain Imagist predecessors who were presenting object description, but without any larger aims.

carries the sequence of disclosure. And that is its vividness. More vivid than falsification, a test of conviction, the sequence of disclosure. I am not speaking of philosophical naiveté . . . . I am thinking of *actualness*, not some toughness of “realism,” some manly toughness: I am talking of consciousness—which is to say, I am talking of experience, telling of experience, and THAT is to say, I am talking of emotion. . . . And actualness is prosody, it is the purpose of prosody and its achievement, the instant of meaning, the achievement of meaning and of *presence*, the sequence of disclosure which comes from everywhere. (26-27)

This passage, itself rich in syntactic complexity, reveals several important points about Oppen’s view of poetics and its potential for presenting truth. Through the poem’s form, the poet can test the relations of subjects and objects. Syntax provides the optimal means to stage such inquiries because it offers a particular “sequence of disclosure.” The very order of words—and, by extension, any deliberate disruptions or elisions—can induce a new understanding of the relationships between those words and can, in turn, create a “vividness” that colors one’s conception of the world; this type of vividness eschews “falsification.” A significant element of Oppen’s statement is his distinction between “realism” and what he terms “actualness.” When he characterizes “realism” in poetry as “manly toughness,” he critiques a familiar stance in which the poet attempts to penetrate materials by imposing his own order. I would argue that Oppen’s critique here extends to other Imagist poets, particularly Pound, who uses techniques of collage and juxtaposition, history and culture, to stabilize his sense of the self in the modern world and to create his

own order. In fact, Pound's emphasis on applying order to the world may help explain his sympathies with fascism.<sup>71</sup>

One can also read Williams, who is in many ways more similar to Oppen than Pound, in a masculine vein, particularly in his approach to composition. As Williams writes in the Author's Introduction to his 1944 *The Wedge*,

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and his ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes. (*CPII* 54)

Williams's focus on the poet's perceptions, and his goal of "making" the words replicate these perceptions, suggests that language should reproduce an already-achieved revelation about the subject's experience; artistic creation becomes a process of poetic control in elevating experience into representation. As we have seen Williams claim in *Spring and All*, the creation of the "thing," via the imagination, becomes an act of asserting language on "a wordless/ world// without personality" (*I* 142); the act of naming grants the poet's authority in making things. Although the motives suggested here may be pure—to depict a realistic version of the world,<sup>72</sup> "without distortion"—Oppen deems the result ultimately false. Oppen's description of "toughness" in the earlier quote suggests that a move toward realism represents a futile attempt to assert control in a world where

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<sup>71</sup> Pound's fascination with the hyper-masculine Troubadour poets is well-known. Peter Nicholls has characterized modernism's "Men of 1914"—Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce—as writers concerned with a politics of gender that reflects their underlying "preoccupation with forms of authority" (*Modernisms* 192). He contends that this emphasis on masculinity leads toward the containment of emotion (itself a feminine threat) through the objectification of objects. Oppen reinforces this sense of Pound's poetics in a 1973 letter when he describes, "Pound's ego system – the specific system everything for the opportunity of stupid masculine rhetoric (i.e. where he is lousy) Not where he is not lousy" (*SL* 254).

<sup>72</sup> Williams makes it clear in *Spring and All* that his use of the imagination does not aim to distort reality but, in fact, to renew the reader's perception of it: "Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situation, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully" (*I* 149).

the individual too often lacks it. This very impulse is evident in the work of Robert Frost, wherein the poem becomes a space to assert, through language, masculine authority over conditions that have left the speaker vulnerable. In contrast, a poet striving to articulate “actualness” of experience depicts the world as he receives it; the posture becomes one of passivity rather than agency. In fact, Oppen frequently articulates the subject’s passive relations to external materials as he strives to understand his real conditions. This poet need not fully comprehend the “words interrelated around him” or the precise nature of his experience as he examines his relations to objects. Instead, the poem becomes a space of inquiry and discovery. This experience of consciousness proves more truthful, for it presents a subject testing experience in a particular moment to gain meaning. Such a process is consistent with Oppen’s compositional practice, which, according to Stephen Cope, often involved cutting up phrases and pasting them onto one another at various stages of revision (*SPDP* 16). Thus, even Oppen’s own “experience of consciousness” did not come automatically through interaction with the object world. Instead, by using syntax to test language within the poem, Oppen can present a consciousness awakening to truths within things. As he observes in his Statement, “Note by note the prosody carries the relation of things and the sequence: the poet learns almost everything from his own verse, his own prosody” (26). The poet reassesses the nature of language and the subject’s relationship to the object just as the reader engages these very tasks.

As Oppen uses language to delve into things, he adopts a practice that finds value in even the smallest details of grammar and diction. He told Burton Hatlen in 1980, “All along I’ve had a sense that the structure of the sentence closes off the little words. That’s where the mysteries are, in the little words. ‘The’ and ‘and’ are the greatest mysteries of

all” (38). The deliberate nature of his fragmented syntax allows readers to mine the “mysteries” of relations. The “little words”—the ands, buts, ofs, and ins—offer greater potential to highlight disparate, disjointed relationships in the world. It is *through* such words that the subject can determine relationships between words and, in turn, apply these connections to the objects represented. Oppen plays against the reader’s expectations for conventional discourse in order to redirect attention and reveal unexpected—often hidden—relationships to things.

Equating “realism” with “manly toughness,” Oppen clearly recognizes the gendered implications he is undertaking by applying a more feminine approach to perception. It is thus significant that he opens *Discrete Series* with an image of Henry James’s Maude Blessingbourne<sup>73</sup> staring through her window at the world “with which/ one shares the century” (*NCP* 5), an allusion to James’s short story, “The Story In It.” Maud is a young widow staying at the home of Mrs. Dyott, who, unbeknownst to Maud, is having an affair with Colonel Voyt. When Voyt comes to lunch one afternoon, Maud hides her infatuation with the flirtatious colonel as the two engage in conversation over French novels and the degree to which women can ever express their true desires. Maud remains trapped in expectations of women’s virtue that require her to keep her passions hidden. The irony, of course, is that Mrs. Dyott easily recognizes Maud’s secret, and, by the end, informs Colonel Voyt—“the object” of Maud’s passions—of the crush. When Maud critiques the lack of “decent” heroines in French novels and their depiction of “the

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<sup>73</sup> James spells his character’s name “Maud,” while Oppen adds the ‘e’ to “Maude.” Although there is little to suggest that Oppen’s spelling change is anything other than an error, Harold Schimmel reads the move as a credit to Oppen’s enrichment of this character: “Even poor, lovely Maud Blessingbourne is given the additional ballast of Oppen’s ‘e’” (299). Because, in some sense, I see James’s Maud and Oppen’s Maude as two different characters, I will alter the spelling to reflect the particular version to which I am referring; I find that Oppen’s Maude has much greater visionary potential—precisely because of Oppen’s poetic technique—than James’s character ever demonstrates.

poverty of life,” Voyt replies, “To me, when all’s said and done, they seem to be—as near as art can come—in the truth of the truth. . . . Your complaint of their monotony is a complaint of their conditions” (422). Voyt repeats this idea that literature offers truths about human conditions that “decency” may require us to repress; his interest in “truth” proves a literary fascination in line with Oppen’s own aims. While Maud easily withdraws from her unhappiness and boredom into the pleasure of her secret fantasy, James’s title—the “Story *In It*”—suggests there is always a dimension of truth that remains hidden and must be mined for any real knowledge of the world being represented.

Tom Sharp finds Oppen’s invocation of Maud to be ironic, given that “Maude Blessingbourne had been contented to love from a distance, but Oppen felt more a part of ‘the world, weather-swept, with which/ one shares the century,’ the world he threw himself into” (280). I find this reading slightly problematic, given that Oppen opens *Discrete Series* with this poem, making it doubtful he would expect readers to recognize irony within a poetic stance he has not yet fully articulated. Rather, Oppen identifies to some extent with Maud’s stance toward the world, her repression of secret desires, and her superficial attention to the world. (She, after all, fails to recognize Colonel Voyt’s affair with her friend.) Maud’s error is one readers too often make. In repressing certain truths, the world takes on a tamer, cleaner quality, though one’s interaction with it is rendered false. Although Oppen may understand Maud’s stance, he nevertheless critiques it and uses his poetics to promote a different kind of encounter. As Charles Altieri notes in his 1979 essay defining “The Objectivist Tradition,” Objectivism “is not merely attention to objects: it entails the construction of aesthetic objects in such a way that the

conditions of desire are themselves dramatized and forced to take responsibility for their productions” (12). Altieri’s point speaks to Maud’s condition; through Oppen’s poetics he forces such desires to the surface.

That he enacts this challenge through a female-gendered gaze distances Oppen’s poetics from the “manly” control presented in the other modernists thus far examined in this study; he is not shaping an authoritative representation of the world, but instead communicating the subject’s complicated relations to objects more truthfully. His positioning of Maude above the world and watching through a pane of glass also proves significant: she does not interact with the objects she sees, but stands a lens eye above them—in the sense of an “Objective” as Zukofsky defines the term in his *Poetry* essay: “The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus” (268). Yet, through a form of vision that the poem enacts—one that tests the nature of language and of experience—she comes to understand her relation to this world with greater “actualness.” Oppen achieves this effect specifically through his use of syntax and his divisions of the line that prompt particular reconsideration of Maude’s relations:

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were  
saying, but of boredom  
Is—aside from reading speaking  
smoking—  
Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,  
wished to know when, having risen,  
“approached the window as if to see  
what really was going on”;  
And saw rain falling, in the distance  
more slowly,  
The road clear from her past the window-  
glass—  
Of the world, weather-swept, with which  
one shares the century. (*NCP* 5)

The poem opens with a series of deliberate disruptions that negate or interrupt clear delivery of the information. Oppen begins not with the sentence's subject (Maude) but rather with its direct object, "knowledge," placing the emphasis on *what* she desires while obscuring her identity. When we do identify Blessingbourne nearly halfway through the poem, Oppen particularizes the agent only for the purposes of the poem (suggesting, for example, that "in this instance it was Maude Blessingbourne"). By keeping the perpetrator deliberately obscure, and by syntactically emphasizing the object of her desires, Oppen suggests that Maude's stance could be anyone's—indeed ours.

The "knowledge" in the first line is itself modified through prepositional phrases, first negated as "not of sorrow" but rather "of boredom." In this poem, as well as in his later work, Oppen emphasizes boredom as the means through which one gains greater knowledge of being. Seeing something through boredom, through superficial acceptance, is of course the stance that Oppen wants to disrupt, but he nonetheless considers it the starting point for greater inquiry. Much has been written about Oppen's fascination with Heidegger's notion of boredom. However, when Oppen wrote this poem in 1929, he had not yet encountered Heidegger's ideas, although Heidegger presented his concept of boredom in a 1929 Acceptance Speech of the Chair of Philosophy at Freiburg. As Oppen told Dembo, "The words 'boredom' and 'knowledge' are, in their German equivalents, the words he uses. So I feel I have a natural sympathy with Heidegger—that he should use as a philosophic concept a mood of boredom" (CL 169). It is quite clear in his interview that the similarity in 1929 was merely serendipitous and not based on any exposure to Heidegger's ideas. Oppen's notion of boredom becomes his entry-point for knowledge because it enacts a stance in which one has tired of common acceptance of the

surface world (Oppen's claim in the Daybooks of "the world as a limited whole") and is thus positioned to look deeper.

We see Maude Blessingbourne, in fact, enacting this very stance of boredom in the poem's second line, which opens with "Is," creating an emphasis on the static experience of being. However, the full syntactical structure is interrupted again, this time with the "aside from" phrase that separates "reading speaking smoking" from the main action of the sentence. Oppen uses these words as gerunds, transferring their function from simple verbs to nominal verb phrases, and in the process he destabilizes their function. The disconnection between "reading speaking smoking" and the rest of the sentence suggests that these actions have failed to inspire in Maude the kind of knowledge she seeks; such mundane activities have only perpetuated her condition of boredom. Because they have not produced an awakened consciousness, the poet must find another means to do so.

Maude has taken the step of "having risen" from her seat and is now positioned beside the window. The conditional "as if" suggests there is no guaranty she will attain a vision of "what really was going on." In James's story, Maud's action of going to the window proves merely an empty gesture. Yet, Oppen denies his readers such superficial interaction: through the poem's form, we must work to see "what really was going on." Oppen emphasizes this point through his use of the semicolon at the end of the quoted line, even though it is not grammatically necessary. This device establishes a solid break between the two actions ("approached the window" . . . "And saw rain falling") and thus acknowledges two distinct modes of "seeing"—observation that merely looks at the world from a distance (in this case, Maud's cursory glance) but fails to acquire a true

understanding of relations within it; and a more visionary gaze that obtains both recognition and connection.

The second half of the poem provides a glimpse of how such recognition can occur, a direction Oppen again offers through his syntax. The last three lines contain several chains of propositional phrases, grammatical devices that indicate temporal, spatial, or logical relationships between objects and the remaining information in a sentence. Maude observes rain falling “in the distance more slowly,” and the rest of the poem traces a consciousness awakening first to the physical realities of her surroundings—to rain slowing in the distance as she looks down the road—and then to the larger world of history. Maude must draw connections between herself and “the world, weather-swept, with which [she] shares the century.” The first such awakening occurs in the phrase “from her,” which suggests an awareness that the road she is watching originates from her own space; she takes on a temporal and spatial presence in relation to the objects she is watching. The ambiguous placement of “past” in that same line, which can fit both as the object of the phrase (“from her past”) and a preposition introducing the next (“past the window-glass”), forces the reader to assess the relationships between the words. Oppen avoids grouping the word with either phrase by refusing to insert a comma, and thus “past” serves a double function: to link Maude’s personal history to the larger world—and promote a greater view of the “human history” Oppen cites in his Daybooks—and to emphasize the distance Maude must overcome to establish a connection with objects beyond the glass. Further syntactical disruption occurs when “Of the world” interrupts the chain of prepositions. The object to which this phrase is linked, the *what* of the world, is not clearly indicated. However, the repetition of “Of”

at the start of a line directs the reader back to the third line (“Of what”), suggesting that Oppen has now replaced the ambiguous “what” of line three with “the world.” As Maude has awakened to consciousness, she now understands that the knowledge she seeks is knowledge “of the world”; her boredom impels her to see the world more truthfully and to understand her relation to the objects in it. Through the poem both Maude and the reader learn how to engage the world from a more informed perspective.

The significance of this poem cannot be overstated within *Discrete Series* or within Oppen’s ideas of his poetics. He alludes to this poem in “Route,” in his 1968 *Of Being Numerous*, saying “Not to reduce the thing to nothing—// I might at the top of my ability stand at a window/ and say, look out; there is the world” (*NCP* 193). Here, Oppen affirms the value of the “thing,” and of engaging with the objects of the world, as a vehicle for achieving knowledge of “being.” In *Daybook IV: II*, Oppen again alludes to Maude:

The boredom which  
To Maude Blessingbourne, I wrote!, disclosed  
Everything, ^I wrote^ —

I should have written, not the rain  
Of a nineteenth century day, ^but^ the motes  
In the air, the dust

Here still. (202)

“Motes” of dust, the smallest particles, are presumably unseen. For Maude to look out and see such dust, as well as its connection to history, to its presence “here still,” would imply that Maude’s enhanced perception now allows her to see dimensions of things hidden to a surface gaze, an achievement also in line with Oppen’s goals for his poetics.

Although this opening poem does not feature object description as its rhetorical focus— instead emphasizing the nature of Maude’s stance toward perception—*Discrete Series* quickly moves into poems examining concrete objects more directly. Maude Blessingbourne serves as a model of the perceiving subject, with the poem’s syntactical experimentation illustrating how the subject should embark on object exploration. In the poems that follow, Oppen presents a subject encountering objects of modern technology and exploring aspects of these things that remain hidden as the subject ponders his relation to them. Oppen promptly turns his attention to a space inside one of modernity’s most powerful symbols, the modern skyscraper, with the subject looking up at an elevator shaft—itsself a hidden internal mechanism of a modern building.<sup>74</sup> In this poem, the subject speaks from inside the object, subsumed within the very structures of modern technology. Perhaps the poem’s most defining characteristic is the alienating and unnatural experience of its object representation. In fact, Oppen obscures the elevator to the point where it is nearly unrecognizable. Until Tom Sharp confirmed directly with Oppen that the poem refers to an elevator (many of which in New York in the 1930s had a device shaped like a T), several critics cited the obscurity of the referent, with some even misidentifying it.<sup>75</sup> As Chilton claims, “Significantly, we can only provisionally identify the referent of the first poem from the text. Charles Tomlinson sees it as an elevator. For the uninitiated, it may seem equally likely to refer to a light fixture or even a milk-dispensing machine. The real question may be whether or not we need to identify it”

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<sup>74</sup> Tom Sharp notes that Zukofsky made just this observation when he included the poem in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, writing to Carl Rakosi that the anthology would represent Oppen through “a short poem presenting the modern skyscraper—the sense of being inside it” (qtd. in Sharp 282). Sharp observes, “For Zukofsky, the poem does not simply record the elevator portal. The poem is synecdochic; the part represents the whole.”

<sup>75</sup> See Abby Shapiro’s essay, “Building a Phenomenological World: Cubist Technique in the Poetry of George Oppen,” in which she claims it may be a human being (250).

(93). Although I find the object's identity of particular importance, Chilton's point is useful for illustrating the degree to which Oppen avoids visual clarity in the object description. Instead, he draws attention to the elevator's parts, as well as the speaker's perspective as a passive, still spectator looking up from within the structure. The poem is as much about the speaker's vantage point as it is the elevator:

1.  
White. From the  
Under arm of T

The red globe.

Up  
Down. Round  
Shiny fixed  
Alternatives

From the quiet

Stone floor... (NCP 6)

In contrast to the still and quiet speaker, the object has some measure of power in its motion: it moves up and down and exhibits rich textures ("shiny" and "round" with its beaming "red globe"). The structure seems to move independently of any human agent.

Steven Shoemaker suggests that the poem presents "a kind of subject/object confusion" (71), in which a modern subject examines the increasingly dominant experience of being subsumed inside a machine. More broadly, Shoemaker reads *Discrete Series* as a text in which Oppen illustrates modernity's "crisis of dis/embodiment" resulting from an increasingly "posthuman order" that boasts "profound implications for the fate of the human subject" (63). In this emerging order—a term Shoemaker applies from Katherine Hayles and Jean Baudrillard—the human subject

becomes diminished alongside the ascendancy of machines. Shoemaker concludes that Oppen is “mapping an early moment in our evolution toward the posthuman condition.” The human experience portrayed, Shoemaker argues, is often that of a disembodied subject negotiating new relations to machines: “Again and again in Oppen’s series, the human presence is nearly overwhelmed by the machined environment, but the poems remain dedicated to giving meticulous accounts of the transformations, conflicts, and confusions engendered by the dynamics of various sorts of urban encounters” (78). Shoemaker’s reading proves consistent with my own assessment of Oppen’s subject as overwhelmed by external materials. Yet, my reading focuses on moments of “subject-object confusion” where the subject strives to better understand its own existence and the conditions of being that are changing within modernity. Thus, despite the poems’ frequent attention to object descriptions, they just as often recognize the subject striving for meaning.

In the elevator poem, for example, the final two lines emphasize the speaker’s location against the moving machine. By highlighting these lines on individual stanzas, Oppen creates a distinct break between the motion of the object (enticing the eye with its “Round/ Shiny fixed/ Alternatives”) and the subject reporting “From the quiet,” ultimately drawing the reader’s eye to rest on the subject pondering this mechanical “alternative” to humanity: a mechanism that has radically transformed relations of power and labor. For as both Sharp and Shoemaker point out, the elevator plays a particular role within modernity that has allowed transformations of urban life and economics to take place. Shoemaker notes, “In terms of ‘architectural history,’ the modern is skyscraper/machine would not have been possible without the invention of the passenger

elevator. The elevator is what makes the skyscraper work” (70). Yet, even as the poem highlights this internal mechanism of modern labor, it is ultimately grounded through the observing speaker, who remains situated on the “stone floor.” In its fragmented syntactical structure, the poem stages the disorienting nature of the subject’s relationship to this modern thing: as the world moves in new ways, the subject remains rooted in a place from which to ponder his new conditions.

Oppen continues to examine transformations in capitalist relations of power that threaten the modern subject in the unnamed fragment marked “2” (which immediately follows “1” above). When he opens the poem with the connective “Thus,” the obvious syntactical inclination would be to link this cause-and-effect relation to the preceding poem. Yet, a thematic connection between the two poems proves unclear. The true correlation may be in the perspective Oppen illustrates, in which the subject looks up from within the thing and wrestles to gain understanding of transformed labor conditions:

Thus  
Hides the  
  
Parts—the prudery  
Of Frigidaire, of  
Soda-jerking—  
  
Thus  
  
Above the  
  
Plane of lunch, of wives  
Removes itself  
(As soda-jerking from  
the private act  
  
Of  
Cracking eggs);  
  
big-Business (NCP 7)

In a first reading, the causal relation of “thus” remains unclear. *Something* has asserted agency to “hide the parts,” but the poet can only lament the loss of what has been hidden. In a broader sense, I read this poem as a statement confirming Marx’s observations on the fetish nature of the commodity. Through his analysis of what gets hidden, the “prudery of Frigidaire,” Oppen makes visible the labor that sustains capitalism. Moreover, Oppen’s own syntactical fragmentation serves to make visible the labor behind the poem itself: This creative act proves one of testing and revelation; it is *through* form that Oppen can uncover relations of power. Power and agency prove central themes of the poem, with the syntax uncovering how such power relations work. Two lines contain only the word “Thus,” suggesting causal relationships, with undetermined agents enacting power. Another line contains only the words, “Above the,” suggesting an order of hierarchy. The poem reflects the experience of a particular social order where an ambiguous agent exists to assert power, to create certain effects upon individual subjects, and to stand apart and above the “Plane of lunch” where consumption actually occurs.

The concept of the “prudery/ Of Frigidaire, of/ Soda-jerking” contains several layers of repression, in particular, hiding the human experiences involved in production and creation. The move to bracket the object (the Frigidaire) with prepositions makes visible that a particular system of relations actually *produces* this kind of prudery in which a refrigerator or a soda-jerk can offer clean surface imagery with no hint of the messy labor embedded within. Prudery represents a form of observation that refuses to look into things, but prudery also brings us back to Maud Blessingbourne and the idea of repressed sexuality. The evocative language of “soda-jerking,” as well as the sexual connotations of “the private act// Of/ Cracking eggs” cannot be ignored. Oppen critiques

a social prudery that denies honesty even about the way humans are conceived. The relationship of “big-Business” to this sexual repression suggests a larger system of regulation being enacted through social and economic structures, in which messy aspects of life—labor, sexuality, desire—become repressed within the thing.

Oppen addresses other “unreal” surfaces of technology in at least two poems representing cars, where he again presents the subject exploring his sense of self among changing modern conditions. Through his representation of this object, Oppen invites readers to look through the car’s “unreal” surfaces and consider how this object has altered the subject’s existence. This proves a deliberate goal of the poem that begins “Closed car—closed in glass,” a poem he cites in his interview with Dembo as distinguishing his poetics from that of Williams. Since Pound’s preface to *Discrete Series* comparing the two poets, Oppen has widely been associated with Williams due to the poet’s similarities in theme and syntactical experimentation. Yet, Oppen always resisted the association, telling Dembo, “my attitudes are opposite those of Williams” (CL 169).<sup>76</sup> Critics such as Charles Altieri, Marjorie Perloff, Eleanor Berry, and Randolph Chilton have also explored dissimilarities between Williams and Oppen. Chilton’s analysis is useful in his observation that “Williams is not unaware that the true nature of the existence of things is often obscured (by society and even language, for example), but his

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<sup>76</sup> Williams has commonly been situated within the larger Objectivist nexus, due to his personal friendships and professional affiliations with Objectivist poets and Oppen’s Objectivist Press. In his *Autobiography*, he claims a significant role in inaugurating the movement, offering this summary of Objectivist theory:

The poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes. . . . The poem being an object (like a symphony or cubist painting) it must be the purpose of the poet to make his words a new form: to invest, that is, an object consonant with his day. That was what we hoped to imply by Objectivism, an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse. (264-265)

But to this, he adds, “Nothing much happened in the end” (265). Although he was clearly affiliated with the theories behind the Objectivists, I would argue that his use of the object—even by the 1930s—was much different than that of Oppen.

poetry for the most part attempts to return us to the perception of true essences (in the concrete, of course). Truth is accessible to perception; we have the ability to perceive it” (94). This distinction supports my own sense of the poets’ differences: Williams’s poetry, even through its use of fragmentation and linguistic play, remains focused on visual clarity so the poet’s descriptions can promote access to some universal form of knowledge within the thing. In other words, language can represent perception. For Oppen, on the other hand, language itself must be defamiliarized for the subject to gain real understanding of knowledge hidden within the thing. The poem provides the means of testing perception, although, in the space of the poem, the subject may not have yet fully realized the results of this test. Oppen told Dembo:

Williams likes to name those objects: wheelbarrow, white chickens, etc. I, too, have a sense—I hesitate to say it because I have no way of defending it—of the greater reality of certain kinds of objects than of others. It’s a sentiment. I have a very early poem about a car closed in glass. I felt that somehow it was unreal and I said so—the light inside that car. Shall I read it? It’s very short. . . . In fact a lot of the poems talk about that sort of thing.

Closed car—closed in glass—  
At the curb,  
Unapplied and empty:  
A thing among others  
Over which clouds pass and the alteration of lighting,<sup>77</sup>  
An overstatement  
Hardly an exterior.  
Moving in traffic  
This thing is less strange—

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<sup>77</sup> In the poem’s representation in *Discrete Series*, the enjambment of this line is slightly altered to read: “Over which clouds pass and the alteration of lighting,” (NCP 13).

Tho the face, still within it,  
Between glasses—place, over which  
Time passes—a false light. [*Discrete Series*]

There is my feeling of something false in overprotection and over-  
luxury—my idea of categories of realness. (*CL* 167-168)

I am interested here in Oppen's emphasis on the "greater reality" of certain kinds of objects, and yet the "unreality" or "falseness" in the way we perceive them. While Williams designates these objects, bringing them into clarity through the act of naming—and pursuing universality through the poetic construction of the thing—for Oppen naming alone does not make us see what lies hidden beneath the "exterior." In this poem, a car is merely a "thing among other things" whose actual use-value has been obscured through its strange exterior. Only when the car begins to move in traffic does it become "less strange," so the speaker sitting within it can begin to conceptualize its purpose in the modern world. However, the poem's anxiety over the passage of time, which nonetheless haunts the speaker, suggests that occupying the car remains troubling, "strange," and "unreal," particularly as the speaker considers this object in relation to history. If Oppen is concerned with "categories of realness," then he must ascertain what makes this object real: to understand its function within his historical moment and how this object has changed human interaction with the material world. Rather than in eras past, when man might sit atop his horse, exercising control over the reins and thus over his speed and motion, Oppen's subject remains hidden, reduced only to a "face, still within it,/ Between glasses." He looks out upon the world he moves through but remains

disconnected through layers of glass, rendered oddly passive in the face of the car's power.<sup>78</sup>

Finding what is real in the scene comes only through a consideration of the “false light,” an experience Oppen highlights through line breaks and syntax. What ultimately proves “false” is not the object itself, but the subject's condition within it. For all the techniques promoting inquiry of the object, the poem—much like we saw in the elevator poem—ends by returning to the subject's relation to this unreal thing; in fact, what emerges are questions about how this object has transformed the subject's sense of his own conditions. This shift begins with Oppen's attention to “alteration of lighting” (in the enjambment of the poem as published in *Discrete Series*), which proves “An overstatement,” suggesting that this subject has been misreading the nature of his relationship to the car, previously existing in un-critical, passivity. Instead, Oppen's form promotes a different kind of interaction. The disruptive syntax of the final lines emphasizes the experience of the subject inside the car, existing between planes of glass, in a space “over which/ time passes.” Although this subject is rooted in history, the representation thus far has not been one of “human history” highlighting the subject's real conditions. Yet, by positioning the speaker within the object—and formally so, through the use of dashes—Oppen draws attention to the “false” nature of this experience. Exposing the strangeness of the subject-object relationship, he depicts a subject deconstructing the nature of his own existence.

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<sup>78</sup> Oppen's treatment of the car here is reminiscent of F.S. Fitzgerald's representation of the automobile in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), where cars take on deadly power while seemingly rendering their drivers powerless. As one of Gatsby's party guests laments after a car crash, “I know very little about driving—next to nothing. It happened, and that's all I know” (54).

Oppen explores similar tensions over the subject's experience in relation to technology in another unnamed car poem:

The evening, water in a glass  
Thru which our car runs on a higher road.

Over what has the air frozen?

Nothing can equal in polish and obscured  
origin that dark instrument

A car

(Which.

Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt (NCP 8)

Here, riding in the car renders the world beyond this object an unreal “what”; again, the car as an instrument of modern technology disconnects man from the natural world. How can nature compete with the “polished” instrument of a car, whose description suggests a constructed kind of perfection—one whose origins of labor are notably “obscured”? Again, the syntactic and grammatical choices prove significant for provoking Oppen’s exploration of the thing, specifically in the final three lines. He privileges the car by placing the word on its own line. Yet, the relationships that follow prove ambiguous. Why does the next line begin with a parenthesis that is never completed? Why does the penultimate line end with a period, and the final line include a semicolon after “ease”? Oppen experiments with punctuation to induce a particular stance of inquiry. He juxtaposes “a car” with the relative pronoun “which” to explore the very nature of that object. Relative pronouns introduce subordinate or modifying information about a subject. However, Oppen’s use of the parenthesis here suggests uncertainty in his line of questioning. Can he actually identify the modifying nature of a car? Can he ascertain whether it produces “ease”? The use of the period to end this inquiry suggests that the uncertainty itself *is* a finality: man can never fully know this object to assess its impact on

our experience. Yet, in the face of such uncertainty, the poem turns instead to the subject's condition: the final image of "the hand on the sword-hilt" invites us to consider the subject. A hand poised on the handle of a sword, prepared for thrusting it into battle, would have particular power and authority. Oppen again calls upon an image of eras past to question the agency and authority of this modern subject. Does this driver wield similar power? Who holds the real control—the man or that "dark instrument" of the car? The poem reveals the subject's anxieties over changing modern conditions.

As Oppen represents objects of modern technology, he also considers the subject's relations to certain natural objects, revealing a sense of alienation and disconnection. In "Party on Shipboard" (one of the few titled poems in the collection), party-goers demonstrate a kind of unreal interaction with the sea, with whom they are "incapable of contact/ Save in incidents" (*NCP* 15). Because the party-goers have little actual connection with the sea, it is difficult for them to determine their relationship to this object. The poem continually questions what the sea "is," after informing the reader that "the sea is not/ water." This thing becomes different from what composes it, is "a constant weight/ In its bed," as the poet negotiates a new understanding of "the sea/ Freely tumultuous." Oppen told Dembo he considered this poem a failure because it does not penetrate the object to provide greater vision of the sea. He explained this was the last *Discrete Series* poem he wrote and his "inability to see"—this essential failure of his poetic experiment—was one of the reasons he stopped writing poetry for the next 25 years:

The "Party on Shipboard,"—I just remembered it better—records the failure of that perception of the sea, though the concept is still in my mind.

But it ends with just the waves homogenously . . . they just leap about. At least within that image I didn't . . . I left it as a contradiction, that I *know* there is such a thing as "the sea," the whole. But the poem doesn't manage to see it, and it records the poet's—my own—inability to see it. So that it leads directly to what I've told you about my giving up poetry. ("Oppen on His Poems" 202)

As the subject strives to understand the way certain objects have reshaped modern experience, this poem's "failure" proves particularly problematic. Ultimately, there is a limit to what the subject can perceive and what the poem's form can achieve by testing experience. For a poet questioning the efficacy of his poetics at this moment in history, Oppen's inability to penetrate the thing to better understand human experience contributes to his preoccupation with his poetic function.

Despite Oppen's personal sense of inadequacy over "Party on Shipboard," my reading of other *Discrete Series* poems illustrates the potential of his poetics of things. As the poems become things themselves to be examined, their form allows the reader to better explore subject-object relations amidst particular modern conditions. Thus, Oppen invites readers to see beyond the surface of objects, to enact a stance of questioning that promotes recognition of the "actualness" of experience. As Oppen wrote in one of his final poems, a collection of "Twenty-Six Fragments" entitled by archivists, "The Last Words of George Oppen":

~~Poetry must be~~

Clarity means, among  
other things, to know  
how the words come to  
meaning

to experience how the  
words come to meaning (SPDP 235)

The poems of *Discrete Series* meet this very standard, requiring the reader to experience how language—used to effect “clarity”—can reveal new depths to the objects we encounter.

## Chapter Five: “the tipping of an object toward the light”: Modernism and the Possession of Things

In the poem “The Fish” from her debut collection, *North and South* (1946), Elizabeth Bishop demonstrates her own fascination with themes of observation and possession. The subject engages in the act of looking and demonstrates a preoccupation with how one comes to know—and, in turn, possess—an object under observation. Bishop captures the fish, both in the poet’s rhetorical act of looking and the speaker’s physical act in the opening lines as she announces, “I caught a tremendous fish/ and held him beside the boat/ half out of water” (42). A poetic form of capture ensues in which the subject comes to know the object through layers of meticulous description. Bishop frames the encounter as one of domination and possession: the fish is “battered and venerable/ and homely.” He has not fought his capture and seems resigned to his status as a thing fixed with the speaker’s “hook/ fast in a corner of his mouth.” Yet, we quickly find that physical possession of the object by no means guarantees the speaker’s domination. When she describes the fish’s “brown skin . . . like ancient wallpaper,” decorated with “shapes like full-blown roses/ stained and lost through age,” Bishop depicts an elusive figure, whose markings have gradually faded. External shapes that were once brightly stained have since been “lost”; such markings contain meanings now inaccessible to the speaker. Instead, the poet turns to other details:

He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime  
and infested  
with tiny white sea lice,  
and underneath two or three  
rags of green weed hung down.

Although attention to the object's external features sustains the speaker's opening act, the poem shifts when the speaker attempts to pierce the boundary of the fish's flesh and consider its internal conditions:

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

However, in these descriptions, we see that this form of domination-through-description, achieved in the poet's thorough details, was always an act of the mind. The speaker captures the fish only through the imaginative act. What was once simply "I caught" has become the very different gesture inherent in "I thought," with the rhyme pattern that links these two concepts underscoring the transformation from the first action to the second. Bishop's description of the "dramatic reds and blacks" of the fish's insides suggests the performative nature of her own descriptions; in these lines the poem relies entirely on dramatic, figurative details, with the speaker likening the fish's bladder to a vibrant pink peony. Thus far, the speaker achieves capture solely through poetic construction.

The poem consistently shifts with each of the speaker's references to self. In the second half, the sequence of self-referential gestures transition from "I looked into his eyes/ which were far larger than mine/ but shallower, and yellowed" (42) to "I admired his sullen face/ the mechanism of his jaw" (43), and, finally, to "I stared and stared/ and victory filled up the boat." The poem thus reveals its narrative in the speaker's consideration of her own act of looking: what begins as a definitive claim of capture ends

with the speaker's acknowledgment that she cannot, in fact, possess the thing; she can merely stare. Along the way, she embarks on an imaginative attempt at possession ("I thought") and one in which she seeks the object via her own identification ("I looked into his eyes/ which were far larger than mine"). In looking for some reflective gaze that can "look back" and validate this subject-object interaction, the subject recognizes only a clouded, scratched, and semi-transparent substance that refuses deeper access. Instead, the speaker observes "the irises backed and packed/ with tarnished tinfoil/ seen through the lenses/ of old scratched isinglass." The fish's eyes are resistant to penetration and unwilling to respond to the speaker's expectant, covetous stare. Her final admission that "I stared and stared," even after her admission of admiration for the fish's continued survival, reminds the reader of the continual effort observation requires: the speaker has relentlessly pursued access—first through description, then through identification, and, finally, through admiration—that will secure her capture of this thing.

Yet, the fish, we have learned in the poem's narrative, cannot be captured. The speaker finds evidence of its resistance to other attempts:

and then I saw  
that from his lower lip  
—if you could call it a lip—  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,  
or four and a wire leader  
with the swivel still attached,  
with all their five big hooks  
grown firmly in his mouth.  
A green line, frayed at the end  
where he broke it, two heavier lines,  
and a fine black thread  
still crimped from the strain and snap  
when it broke and he got away.  
Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,

a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.

The speaker gains admiration for the fish's markings of survival, its "beard of wisdom" that serves as proof of its autonomy and resistance. Here, the very effort of possession becomes a type of battle. Reminiscent of the dissection-possession we find in Marianne Moore's "Those Various Scalpels," possession in Bishop's poem proves an act with brutal, and lasting, consequences for the object; the fish has resisted through its defensive, "weaponlike" armor. The speaker gains a genuine moment of admiration by recognizing the object's autonomy, its history, and the strength underlying its rugged exterior. As this fact destabilizes the speaker's authority in claiming possession of the fish, it prompts the poem's climactic moment:

I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,  
from the pool of bilge  
where oil had spread a rainbow  
around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange  
the sun-cracked thwarts,  
the oarlocks on their strings,  
the gunnels—until everything  
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go. (43-44)

This passage is notable as much for what the speaker does not say as for what she does. The ambiguity around the idea of "victory" heightens the tension over whether the fish has, again, resisted capture, or whether the speaker has gained victory via the poetic capture. Does the victory belong to the subject or the object? In presenting such ambiguity, Bishop invites us to consider "victory" as the poet's achievement of

convergence between subject and object:<sup>79</sup> the poem dramatizes her moment of recognition, and love, for the object she looks upon, a temporary experience of connection. This achievement of “victory” eliminates the very need for capture. The speaker describes an experience in which all distinctions between the subject and object drop out, and there is no longer a need to delineate boundaries: “everything” becomes “rainbow.” Every imperfect feature of the scene—the dilapidated boat, the cracked seat, the rusted engine, the spreading oil—becomes another brush-stroke coloring the emotional intensity of the subject-object connection. The speaker’s perception of such detail has facilitated her convergence with the object, because she has been able to imaginatively embody its experience. Her encounter with the fish has heightened her perception of her own flawed world, and the speaker can now let the fish go. This final gesture suggests that the process, for Bishop, was never about possession, nor was she attempting to claim authority by transforming dilapidated objects into perfected things. Instead, the act of observation—described here only as the “tipping of the object toward the light” but never as the object’s full revelation—allows the subject to wrestle with epistemological questions of knowing. How can the subject know objects outside of the self? Further, how does such knowledge exchange take place? The answer, this poem suggests, is that the subject must humble herself to the object through a different process of interaction—recognition.

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<sup>79</sup> Although I am using language of romantic concepts—in, for example, the subject’s convergence with the object—I do not read this process in Bishop as one of romantic transcendence. Bishop’s subject does not gain certain knowledge or truth, of either the object or herself; she remains firmly grounded in the limitations of her subjective position. Further, her connection with the fish remains fleeting and inaccessible, difficult to even translate into language. What this convergence does provide the subject, however, is a new form of love for the world with which she interacts.

I begin this conclusion with a lengthy reading of Bishop's "The Fish" because it underscores themes I have been developing throughout this dissertation, particularly themes of observation, possession, and authority. In a poem like "The Fish," Bishop places herself in the particular lineage I have been exploring among a strain of modernist American poets. Given, for example, Bishop's own admissions of Marianne Moore's influence on her work (and particularly in her early collection, in which "The Fish" was published), Bishop's poem self-consciously engages many of the same questions we find in Moore's poem of the same title. And yet, as I have been suggesting in my reading, Bishop arrives at very different conclusions. If the modernists in my study have been engaging questions of how the poet can reshape the object into a newly-transformed thing—an aesthetic thing that ultimately grants the subject distance from more personal preoccupations—Bishop demonstrates a different relation to the object. The poet's function is not to capture or possess the object, or even to transform it into a highly-crafted thing that can rest in permanence as the product of a skilled artistic hand, thus removed from the chaotic conditions of its own history. Instead, Bishop recognizes such conditions and, in the process, better acknowledges those tumultuous markings of history that may distinguish her own experience. Unlike the constructed things in the work of Moore or Williams, achieved via the imagination; the domesticated things in Frost's poems as he asserts a masculine voice of authority to mask his own anxieties; and even the syntactically-disjointed things Oppen assembles to regain a sense of authority in the face of destabilizing technology, Bishop does not attempt to polish or hyper-construct the object in her descriptions. Her fish is "battered" and "homely," "sullen" and "aching." It has survived, in fact, because of its pain; it cannot be dismantled piece by piece and

reshaped into a form that will smooth away the rugged imperfections of its exterior. Instead, Bishop's representation celebrates such markings as the poem displays the speaker's recognition of these very qualities. If there is a post-modern shift embodied in Bishop's poem, it is a shift away from authority and perfection. Art can no longer resolve or recast anxieties; the poet can no longer transform the object into a form that exists only in art. Instead, the threats and conditions one finds in the world—the devastation suggested in the poem's references to weaponry and war—pervade the poetic space, where the object remains the object, and the poet's job is to recognize—and admire—the rich history that has shaped its experience. Through such recognition, the subject gains a better understanding of conditions also afflicting the self. In the poetic space, such anxieties can now be laid bare; they need not be recast into some other form. The subject can admit the limitations of knowledge, just as the poet can reveal the limitations of representation. The poet reaches a point when the object can be “let go.”

In this reading of Bishop's work, the drive to distinguish between “objects” and “things,” in Bill Brown's sense, becomes less urgent. This dissertation has been aimed at exploring how modernist poets used objects to make things. In the poets I have examined, the construction of the thing proves a self-conscious act that allows the poet to resolve particular preoccupations. In making “things,” the poet can transform experience into new forms. Things serve as proof of the subject's encounter, with their constructed exteriors—whether polished, in the case of Moore and Frost, or messy and disjointed, as we more often see in Williams and Oppen—allowing the poet to overcome particular concerns inherent in their making. For all the poets in this study, the thing's construction involved the poet's use of technical innovations, but was never a certain or simple

process. Nevertheless, the thing proved the goal of the object study, its achievement a sign of the poet's authority.

In Bishop's "The Fish," we find the subject coming to better know her own conditions by exploring the boundaries between subject and object. The speaker's connection to the fish, achieved through her acknowledgement of a certain history of possession and domination, suggests she has come to terms with her own inheritance of that history. Yet, she no longer wishes to perpetuate this kind of domination, what I am reading as the continued pursuit of the wisdom, authority, universality, and truth that were upheld by the modernists in my study. Bishop's own act of observation allows her to move beyond this lineage even as she illustrates its revision. The poem provides instruction on how the poet can move beyond a form of subject-object interaction that depends upon the object's transformation as its goal. "The Fish" opens with the speaker's capture and ends with her reversal of this action. Although the poem depicts a kind of transformation, it is not one of the object, as we saw taking place in the work of these modernists. Instead, it is a transformation of the subject's knowledge, and one that takes place specifically through poetic recognition. The poet can engage in observation without needing to achieve certainties—of knowledge, representation, or truth. Instead, the pursuit becomes for genuine recognition of the external object.

My study sheds light on an aspect of American modernist poetry that, to date, has not been fully explored: the way that a strain of American poets in the early twentieth century resolved questions and preoccupations of poetic authority in their construction of things. At a moment of social and political turmoil, amidst American landscapes that were themselves undergoing tremendous transformation, we find poets who were, each in

their own ways, considering the role of the poet to respond to particular cultural needs. And, even as such figures as Frost and Williams outspokenly claim the poet's cultural authority, we also see in their poems evidence of their preoccupations with the value and efficacy of creative labor. Can the poetic act grant didactic wisdom? What vocal and poetic gestures must be used to dispense such knowledge? Can the imagination and the declarative power of language promote a move from local contact to universal experience? In Moore we see such questions of poetic authority illustrated in the poet's fascination with aesthetic forms. Can an art object's carefully-constructed exterior elevate it to some form that hides the subject, and the subject's own preoccupations, within it? In Oppen, we find a poet wrestling with the very function of poetry at a moment of political and economic turmoil. What can poetry actually do (in contrast to more pragmatic means) to effect tangible change? Although each of these poets presents a different concept of poetic authority, they share the belief that the poet can use language to reshape knowledge of the external world, and they often demonstrate this point specifically in their representation of things.

This fascination with things is not unique to the modernist poets featured in this study; poets as stylistically-diverse as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, H.D., and Gertrude Stein all demonstrate a preoccupation with objects and their transformation in the poetic space. Among the poets I have not discussed at length, Stevens proves most useful to conclude with, because his ideas about poetry and the imagination underscore several of the major issues this dissertation addresses. Not only does Stevens display a keen interest in objects, but his poems provide a series of meta-statements about poetic function in the modern moment, as well as the process by which subjects can use objects

to reflect aspects of the self. In *Parts of a World* (1942), for example, Stevens presents a diverse collection of object-related poems with such titles as “Prelude to Objects,” “Study of Two Pears,” and “Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers.” In the latter of these, Stevens illustrates the object’s very transformation into a thing that carries meanings individual to the subject:

Hoot, little owl within her, how  
High blue became particular  
In the leaf and bud and how the red,  
Flicked into pieces, points of air,  
Became—how the central, essential red  
Escaped its large abstraction, became,  
First, summer, then a lesser time,  
Then the sides of peaches, of dusky pears.

Hoot how the inhuman colors fell  
Into place beside her, where she was,  
Like human conciliations, more like  
A profounder reconciling, an act,  
An affirmation free from doubt.  
The crude and jealous formlessness  
Became the form and the fragrance of things  
Without clairvoyance, close to her. (*CP* 246-247)

Stevens presents the very process by which the abstractions of color are, first, particularized into the shape of the object; the formless takes on form. A second layer of transformation takes place in which the subject reconciles the “inhuman colors” with an idea she can better understand, “an affirmation free from doubt.” By calling this act one of “[profound] reconciling,” Stevens presents the process as one of making external, inhuman objects compatible with the subject’s own experience: the objects takes on a form representing the “fragrance of things . . . close to her.” The abstraction becomes something that speaks directly to the subject’s own experience. The thing exists “without clairvoyance” because it can not penetrate the speaker; it does not look back or possess

its own vision or wisdom. Instead, it becomes the product of the woman's act: it has become a thing in her own mind.

In poems such as "Sunday Morning," "The Poems of Our Climate," "Of Modern Poetry," and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens examines the poet's role in the modern moment, elevating poetry as an essential response to a world that no longer has religion to dispense certain truths. As Stevens claims in "The Poems of Our Climate," even as the poet transforms the world into crisp, manageable forms, such representations must still account for the inherently messy conditions of the world. Stevens gives the example of a poem capturing a still life of flowers, where "the day itself/ Is simplified: a bowl of white,/ Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round/ With nothing more than the carnations there" (193). Yet, this thing must speak to the frequently chaotic human experiences underlying the simple, precise object description. Stevens implores, "Still one would want more, one would need more,/ More than a world of white and snowy scents" (194). As poetry responds to humanity's need to explore itself, the object representation must provide more than meticulous description; it must speak to the imperfect conditions the subject faces. Any attempt that has "stripped one of all one's torments, concealed/ The evilly compounded, vital I" (193) remains wholly inadequate. "There would still remain the never-resting mind," Stevens tells us, "So that one would want to escape, come back/ To what had been so long composed" (194). Presented with a perfected object, the subject will return to the mind's imperfect, never-resting chaos: "The imperfect is our paradise./ Note that, in this bitterness, delight,/ Since the imperfect is so hot in us,/ Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds." Language remains a "flaw" and an approximation, but it nonetheless allows us to better understand the imperfect

aspects of existence—those experiences that yield both bitterness and delight, those experiences the mind “composes” into forms. Stevens implores his readers to look beneath the simplistic forms of objects to locate their complex, human meanings as things.

For Stevens, poetry provides a model of thought, recording the mind’s act of reckoning with the external world. In the moment of modernity, such form is necessary, wherein the poem illustrates “the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice,” as Stevens describes in “Of Modern Poetry” (239). Stevens raises this idea of sufficiency again when he describes a mind that “has to think about war/ And it has to find what will suffice” (240). Faced with extreme and tumultuous conditions, the mind turns to language to find a form that will be adequate. The mind constructs the poem—“construct[s] a new stage”—that can sufficiently resolve the human need for order. The poem proves a type of response to the world that “must/ Be the finding of a satisfaction,” as it records the process of finding what will “suffice.” “Sufficiency” here poses a very different concept than some attainable perfection through art, as we might have seen in the Romantic subject’s transformation of objects into aesthetic forms. Instead, the poem provides an attempt to resolve the poet’s own preoccupations and anxieties.

In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1947), Stevens goes even further in characterizing poetry’s necessity in the modern moment. Here, he describes poetry as a “supreme fiction” through which humanity can explore essential epistemological and philosophical questions. His use of the word “fiction” implies a false narrative; nevertheless, its portrayal as “supreme” classifies it as a necessary fiction. The poet becomes an essential figure and the poem a vital space of questioning. This concept of

poetic function proves consistent with ones we have now seen several modernist poets aspire toward. All the poets in this study have, in one form or another, pursued poetry that can elevate a “supreme fiction”: Frost, Moore, Williams, and Oppen each use the object’s transformation to achieve some kind of lasting truth that can be preserved within the thing. For Frost, this fiction upholds the poet’s capacity to assert wisdom. For Moore, the poet’s achievement of imaginary possession validates her position of cultural authority. For Williams, the poetic transformation renders the local object a universal thing. And, finally, for Oppen, the act of mining objects for “truth” exposes the subject’s real relations to things. In each of these modernists, the fiction itself proves the goal of the object transformation. And although all these poets recognize language itself as abstract, flawed, and vulnerable to multiplicity, they remain, at times, uncritical about the “supreme fiction” they pursue in the concepts of universality, possession, knowledge, and truth.

Yet, even as these poets aspire toward “supreme fictions,” or universalizing ideas, they prove distinct from Romantic poets because modern preoccupations and anxieties pervade the poetic space. The very goal of the universal remains a “fiction,” albeit a desirable one. These poets also recognize certain challenges inherent in language that destabilize the poet’s sense of authority. As the poem chronicles the object’s transformation into a “thing,” it simultaneously illustrates the poet’s achievement of authority, but such authority is never certain or guaranteed. This sense of the urgency over the need to renew language itself helps explain the technical experimentations we have now seen these poets use to resolve their own preoccupations with poetic authority. Frost illustrates the instability of metaphor for projecting meaning; Moore employs

techniques that can mask the subject's personal conditions and affect a voice of authoritative distancing; Williams fragments the object, and the line, in order to craft a new means of perception that can locate the object's universalizing potential; and Oppen defamiliarizes syntax to expose relations between things. Through all of these techniques, we see these modernists testing the means by which poets can assert meaning through things.

Despite these concerns over poetic function, the transformation of the thing carries the potential for these modernists to assert knowledge that will be "sufficient" in a fractured modern world. Unlike for the Romantics, the world is no longer coherent, and the sublime remains out of reach. The object is no longer a vessel through which the subject can achieve harmony and spiritual transcendence, as it was for Wordsworth or Keats. Instead, the pursuit of the whole, of the universal, of truth, remains, ultimately, a fiction, albeit one the poet can preserve in the constructed and lasting thing.

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