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Agreeable Despair: Modernism and Melancholy

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ABSTRACT

Agreeable Despair: Modernism and Melancholy

by

Derrick Gentry

Advisor: Professor Mary Ann Caws

This study considers a group of distinctly modernist philosophers for whom aesthetic and reflective practices represented a way out of the paralysis of a culture dominated by narrowly conceived philosophical values. These modernist philosophers, I argue, helped to give birth to mode of experimental writing that Robert Musil called “essayism.” I begin in Chapter One with an account of Walter Benjamin’s experimental concept of melancholy and its intersection with the avant-garde practices of French Surrealism. Chapter One begins to contrast Benjamin’s concept of melancholy with Friedrich Nietzsche’s therapeutic efforts to transform and overcome melancholy on both a personal and a cultural level. Chapter Two changes course to pursue a comparative study of Nietzsche and his contemporary, William James. I treat them as proto-modernist philosophers whose efforts to overcome philosophy and replace it with experimental writing are intimately connected with their experimental concepts of melancholy. The efforts of James and Nietzsche represent what I see as an important bridge between Ralph Waldo Emerson’s radical re-conceptualizing of melancholy and later modernist experimental writing. Before turning to Emerson, I read (in Chapter Three) Freud’s 1915 essay “On Transience” alongside Virginia Woolf’s essay “On Being Ill” and James’s “Will to Believe.” Chapter Four then focuses on Emerson’s essay “Experience” as an anticipation of Nietzsche’s concept of experimental writing, as well as a watershed moment in the long history of thinking about melancholy. Chapter Five reads Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo as (in many respects) the ultimate Emersonian text, as well as something of a failed experiment. The study concludes with a series of close readings of Swiss writer Robert Walser, who inspired Max Brod to write: “After Nietzsche, there had to be Walser.” I examine the ways in which Walser pursues the implications of
Nietzsche’s thought at the same time he explores quite different alternatives. Walser, I argue, is an example of a melancholy modernist who successfully converts philosophy into a form of experimental writing. By the end of the study, I hope my account of a modernist melancholy provides a context that sharpens our sense of how difficult it is to come “after Nietzsche.”
Acknowledgments

Thanks to William and to Edie, who are not yet old enough to read but whose spirit presided over this making of this text and whose presence in the world has given me strength and joy in ways that I can only try to convey to them later on. “How is your work, Dad?” I have been asked that question numerous times in the past several months. I'm not sure I can answer that question, William. But I can tell you with certainty what (who) is most important in my life.

Thanks also to William for reminding me that Dürer’s drawings of bunny rabbits and rhinoceroses are just as important and as deeply meaningful as the allegorical images that ask to be interpreted. I love looking at pictures with you; let’s look at some more.

My sister Amy and my brother-in-law Cory Wenger (proud parents of Edie) have given me much support at a distance, and I thank Cory for taking time to read through early drafts of chapters and offering valuable feedback which I hope one day to incorporate in a more fully considered draft.

Thanks to my Dad and to my uncle Tim; and to Pat, Brenda, Rita and Rebecca for their kind and generous hospitality in the final months of my work on this project.

My thanks to Mary Ann Caws for her patience and encouragement over these many years; to Nico Israel for his willingness to serve on my defense committee during a busy time; and to Wayne Koestenbaum, who first introduced me to Robert Walser many years ago and who has demonstrated (once again) how much he genuinely cares about what others have to say and are trying to say.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Emily – my best friend, my best editor, the love of my life, and one person about whom can happily say (translating freely from the Latin phrase): without whom not.
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INTRODUCTION: On Ariadne’s Thread and the Angel of History
(Along with a Brief Disquisition on Ash)

Of the Edriophthalma:
Crustaceans with fixed eyes, that is to say, without stalks and immobile. Very sad by nature, these crustaceans live, withdrawn from
the world, in holes dug out of the cliff.

Erik Satie, notes for Embryons desséchés (“Desiccated Embryos”) for piano (1913)

Reader, do you ever feel sea-sad, loamishly sad, like Tennyson, with that sadness too deep for words? Though of course nothing is
too deep for words for a poet like him and me.

Stevie Smith, Novel Written on Yellow Paper (1936)

I absolutely adore notes. I’d run a thousand paces just to hear one.

Robert Walser, Fritz Kocher’s Essays (1902)

This project began with my discovery of the Swiss writer Robert Walser and a few kindred spirits
— Stevie Smith, Henri Michaux, and Francis Ponge, among others — who all shared a voice that was
distinctly modernist and whose work seemed to reflect an experimental way of thinking about melancholy
— what I was tempted to call their “avant-garde melancholy.” The question for me was not how a shared
temperament found expression in a common style, or how a commonly used adjective could be made to
serve as a theoretical concept. What fascinated me, rather, was how an experimental approach toward
melancholy allowed these writers to open up a new affective space and create a new kind of writing
whose complex movements and rapid modulations defied all generic labels — including “melancholy.”
These writers redefined what melancholy meant; while inviting this clichéd and facile label, they had
somehow made it necessary to replace an adjective with an adverb that did not exist in the language. As
a student of modernist literature, I wanted to understand how this project — transformative in effect, if not
always by conscious intent — nevertheless made it possible to gather a set of writers and to describe them
as “melancholy modernists.” I thus began with a couple of promising paradoxes, a somewhat offbeat
selection of writers, and a conventional plan to devote a chapter of close reading to each. That was the
plan in the beginning. After a series of delays and detours more scholarly than saturnine in nature, I have
produced a study that follows another course – one that now ends with Walser and gathers around him an entirely different cast of characters. I want to explain how the study in its present form gradually and unexpectedly took shape.

Like many readers in the English-speaking world, I was first introduced to Walser by the reprinted edition of the Selected Stories translated by Christopher Middleton and with a brief introduction by Susan Sontag. Walser is a miniaturist in spirit, even in his longer pieces. It is also easy to identify passages in Walser’s writing that are dense with local activity and yet trip along lightly and seem to have no weight at all. Sontag draws our attention to a passage at the very end of “Kleist in Thun,” a short piece from 1913 that imagines the nineteenth-century poet Heinrich von Kleist in the final weeks leading up to his mental collapse, a period spent in solitude as a visitor to the Swiss alpine town of Thun. The story ends with Kleist being transported back home in a stagecoach accompanied by his sister, now his permanent caretaker.¹ The final paragraph of the story serves as a brief coda:

But finally one has to let it go, this stagecoach, and last of all one can permit oneself the observation that on the front of the villa where Kleist lived there hangs a marble plaque which indicates who lived and worked there. Travelers who intend to tour the Alps can read it, children can read it and spell it out, letter by letter, and then look questioningly in each other’s eyes. A Jew can read it, a Christian too, if he has the time and if his train is not leaving that very instant, a Turk, a swallow, insofar as he is interested, I also, I can read it again if I like. Thun stands at the entrance to the Bernese Oberland and is visited every year by thousands of foreigners. I know the region a little perhaps, because I worked as a clerk in a brewery there. The region is considerably more beautiful than I have been able to describe here, the lake is twice as blue, the sky three times as beautiful. Thun had a trade fair, I cannot say exactly but I think four years ago. (25-26)

I had never read language quite like this before. Sontag calls the story and this passage in particular “an account of mental decline as grand as any I know of in literature.” There are certainly generic precedents

¹ Ironically, it was Lisa Walser who escorted her brother to the mental hospital in Waldau, Switzerland in 1929 upon learning (from Walser’s landladies) of the deterioration of his mental state.
for imaginative reconstructions like Walser’s – in Georg Büchner’s remarkable story *Lenz*, for example, which Walser almost certainly had in mind as he wrote “Kleist in Thun.” On a more superficial level, the language seemed to be engaged in something quite different from realist literature and its relatively simple tasks of rendering and recounting experience (or recreating in the manner of historical fiction or “creative non-fiction”). Walser’s prose, it seemed to me, read much like an essay.

If Walser’s is an account of mental decline, I wondered, then whose decline? Is this a little parable of the necessity and ultimate wisdom of “letting go,” a melancholy (and conventionally poetic) sigh of resignation? What, exactly, sets this apart? The narrator’s own voice becomes audible in this final passage, and this first-person “I” offers poignant evidence of a mind warding off its own demons and dealing with its own instability. But the language does not seem to mirror the narrator’s own decline or disintegration. These are the complex modulations of a mind testing out possible affective orientations – ways of “letting go.” In Walser, everything important happens in the language and the way it moves and models a consciousness in the process of testing out different ways of being in the world. Far from a letting go of the reins, I also saw (on the level of craft) a highly self-reflexive attention to the shifts of consciousness in its subtly responsive dialogue with the world. “One can permit oneself...” is a gesture one finds often in Walser, but it has a curious function that makes it more than a stylistic mannerism. An observation is not something one makes, but something that one permits oneself to make only at a precise and carefully prepared-for moment in the spiritual unfolding of the narrative, when and only when the affective orientation achieves the proper angle relative to the scene for that observation to be made. The thought that he might do something (a thought which he reiterates, as if to re-assure himself), his ability to articulate and therefore imagine his own possible agency, creates what we might call the “sound of reality” even more compelling than the contemplation of the material reality of the memorial plaque itself. There is a momentary triumph of identity achieved, and asserted, in the course of navigating and articulating these facts. (The sentence is not in the form: “I, also, I can read it if I want to, as can a swallow, a Turk, a Jew...”; nor is it something Melville’s Bartleby might say: “I can read it, but I prefer not to...”) The reality of the narrator’s relationship to fact replaces (or at least accompanies) what might otherwise be a contemplative fixation on the facts of the world. The swallow and the pre-literate child can

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2 This phrase is one I have picked up from William James, of whom we will hear much more later.
“read” it (letter by letter) without knowing or worrying over the meaning of it.\(^3\) And that second-order power of attending to something, if he chooses to, seems to suffice for this voice.

Sontag describes Walser as an example of a general “depressive type,” and there is ample evidence of a biographical kind to support this claim (viii). I was much more interested, however, in the experimental role that melancholy played in the modeling of a consciousness, in the peculiar distancing effect that I saw in “Kleist in Thun” and elsewhere. Walser’s writing seemed to combine two recognizably modernist features: a fluid and mobile consciousness along with an abstract impersonality, an essay-like intimacy that was made possible through abstraction. At the same time, Walser also challenged my notion of what modernist experimental writing looked like. In her introduction to the Selected Stories, Sontag observes that the effort to introduce Walser to new readers is made easy by “a whole arsenal of glorious comparisons” (vii). Walser is a “Paul Klee in prose,” a cross between Stevie Smith and Beckett, the “missing link” between Kleist and Kafka. We can easily compile a second list of modernist contemporaries – Herman Hesse, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and many others – who are all on record as having recognized in Walser a new and special literary voice. Kafka was an early fan; we can even trace a thematic influence on Kafka in the comical figure of the kommis or lowly clerk. What struck me was the difference between the voices of Kafka and Walser, in spite of the influence and the shared thematic concerns (which extends beyond the kommis figure). Walser did not “sound” at all like Kafka; he did, however, share something with the British writer Stevie Smith and the painter Paul Klee – two modernists who were probably not aware of Walser’s existence. I was dissatisfied, however, with Sontag’s casual attempt to place Walser more generally as a “missing link” within some more continuous line of development in European literature. I wanted to read Walser as a modernist, in relation to other experimental writing that emerged at a particular time and place. If I were to make an argument for reading Walser as a singular but not an isolated figure, then I had to find some non-arbitrary basis for these “glorious comparisons” so that I could present them as a distinctly modernist constellation.

\(^3\) I will devote special attention to the historical significance of Albrecht Dürer’s etching Melancolie I in Chapter One, but an equally iconic image in the history of melancholy is Poussin’s painting of shepherds in a pastoral setting gathered around a tombstone, looking puzzled over the meaning of the words in Latin inscribed on the stone: “Et in Arcadia ego” (“Even in Arcadia, there am I.”)
1. Melancholy Made Cheerful: Walter Benjamin and Robert Walser

Not long after my first encounter with Walser, I revisited another essay by Susan Sontag written around the same time as her introduction to Walser’s *Selected Stories*: the essay titled “Under the Sign of Saturn,” her profile of Walter Benjamin, perhaps the most iconic melancholy modernist. I knew, however, that Benjamin’s iconic status and his importance for my project were not due simply to his saturnine temperament. Sontag’s profile simply elaborated on what Benjamin himself had done. His remarkable essay titled “Aegesilaus Santander,” unpublished during his lifetime, is an anatomy of melancholy in the form of a self-portrait. Even more remarkable was Benjamin’s profile of a specific historical manifestation of melancholy in his study of the German Baroque sub-genre of the Trauerspiel (“mourning-play”). *Die Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiel (The Origin of the German Tragic Drama)* offered theoretical insights into melancholy that were entirely different from Freud’s and far more radical. Benjamin’s interest in melancholy, moreover, dovetailed with his involvement in the Surrealist movement and was both the stimulus and the foundation for his own avant-garde endeavors. On of the most intriguing parts of Sontag’s profile of Benjamin was, in fact, a cryptic comment on Surrealism, whose “chief contribution to sensibility,” she wrote, “was to make melancholy cheerful.”

The constellation metaphor that appealed to me was one I had picked up from Benjamin. The constellation method was Benjamin’s name for a peculiar inductive approach, one that attempted to combine the melancholic’s brooding upon fragments (the allegorical vision of the world in ruins that Benjamin had studied in the Trauerspiel) with collage and other decontextualizing techniques developed by the early twentieth-century avant garde. It was the unorthodox method behind Benjamin’s experimental *Arcades* project. The aim of arranging data into constellations was to make the researcher more responsive to the singularity of the individual datum – an artifact, a voice, a cultural meme – and at the same permit the discovery of patterns and associations that emerged from the material itself. The constellation method, or at least the aspiration behind it, was just what I wanted: an alternative to the synthetic, top-down approach – the self-perpetuating game of subverting canons and categories and doxa, only to exchange them for new ones – that I had come to associate with the conventional academic

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4 In his study of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay defines a “constellation” as “a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle” (14-15).
argument. The thought of invoking any theory at all as the chosen “lens” for my reading of Walser seemed faintly absurdf.

But if I were going to place Walser in some theoretical context, then Benjamin’s theoretical account of melancholy seemed made to order. Benjamin’s major projects, Sontag emphasized, “cannot be fully understood unless one grasps how much they rely on a theory of melancholy” (111). This theory of melancholy (if it could be described as a “theory”) was as idiosyncratic one, to say the least, but it appeared fully legible within a longer history of thinking about melancholy. Benjamin also gave a certain ethical charge and sense of urgency to his critical project of recovery. “The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past,” Benjamin wrote, “is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (*Illuminations* 255). This warning appeared in the series of textual fragments known as the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which also contains Benjamin’s famous interpretation of Paul Klee’s image of the Angelus Novus (which Benjamin reads as the “Angel of History”). A “hope in the past,” which had an ambiguous redemptive and revolutionary sound, gave to this endeavor the feel of a dramatic mission and a purpose that went beyond Walser’s (merely) literary fascination with the small, the marginal, and the insignificant. Benjamin seemed to give a modernist seal of approval to the kind of critical project I envisioned, now pursued in the spirit of a melancholy modernist who also occupied a place within a constellation of figures that also included Walser.

It helped, of course, that Benjamin had written a brief but perceptive essay on Walser. At one point in his essay, Benjamin observed that each of Walser’s sentences was an attempt to make the reader forget the preceding sentence. This is actually quite close to a general observation Sontag had made about Benjamin’s sentences and their self-contained and fragmentary quality, what she described as his “freeze-frame Baroque” style (129). I became intrigued by further temperamental and stylistic similarities. Many of the features of Benjamin’s thought and sensibility that Sontag attributed to a melancholy temperament were qualities that were on display in Walser. Benjamin’s fascination with the miniature, for example, reminded me of W.G. Sebald’s description of Walser as a “clairvoyant of the small.” I could also recognize a shared interest in the “creaturely” and, closely related to that, a

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5 The line appears in *Thesis VI*.
6 An English translation of Benjamin’s essay is reprinted as an appendix in the edition of Walser’s *Microscripts* edited by Susan Bernofsky.
fascination with the ambiguous intentionality of non-living matter. Many passages in Walser came to mind. I remembered Walser’s whimsical disquisition on the material properties of ash:

If, for example, one blows on ash it displays not the least reluctance to fly off instantly in all directions. Ash is submissiveness, worthlessness, irrelevance itself, and best of all, it is itself pervaded by the belief that it is fit for nothing … Ash has no notion of character and is further from any kind of wood than dejection is from exhilaration. Where there is ash there is actually nothing at all. Tread on ash, and you will barely notice that your foot has stepped on something. (qtd. in Sebald 19)

Walser seems to “take the side of things,” as Francis Ponge does in Le parti pris de choses. Walser takes it even one step further: he prefers ash to the presumptuous materiality of wood. But while it was tempting to parlay Walser’s characteristic fascination into an ethical identification, in this case an exercise in “empathizing” with dead matter, I had to acknowledge that what actually happens in Walser is far more complex and provisional. The projections of agency that carry forward the meditation on ash invite us to identify with the submissiveness and insignificance of a substance, even take masochistic delight in that identification (“and best of all…”). At the same time, however, we have a speaking voice that takes an active role in denigrating and having its way with the substance it muses upon. This mobile consciousness, moreover, seems to be testing out different orientations under some pressure, perhaps an underlying animus or sense of frustration. Ash is so submissive, exhibits so little reluctance, that it thwarts even the satisfaction the sadist might take in contemplating it. We may “barely notice” that we have stepped on this something that is, after all, not much of anything at all. But the potential energy that finds its location in the sense of a power over is exactly what puts us in a position to take notice of our own casual and habitual step, and to identify with an activity that has come to seem as disembodied and as passive as the substance upon which we tread. Rather than fantasize over the possible pleasure to be had in exercising power over something or being under someone else’s power – both of which are easy enough to imagine – the passage seems more interested in exploring sources of power that are realized in forms of pleasure, in the satisfactions afforded by the orientations themselves.
The celebration of insignificance, of being a “complete and utter zero,”7 is a running theme found throughout Walser’s work. I found it nearly impossible, though, to equate this fascination (often facetious and comical) with a fidelity to the marginal that I could generalize into an ethical stance. The essay on ash invites us to test out a range of possible identifications, without committing to any one of them. The “power” we gain from identifying with the “powerlessness” of ash is primarily orientational in nature. It seemed possible, at least in theory, to talk of Walser’s destabilizing language in dialectical terms, but at the same time philosophical abstraction of any kind seemed entirely out of place. In Walser’s experiments, it is just as difficult to distinguish between what are normally thought of as the opposite affective poles of “dejection” and “exhilaration” as it is to draw a sharp line between the properties of ash and the purposiveness we attribute to the behavior of living creatures. Walser dissolved such binary distinctions by discovering new affective complexes and orientations, and he did so by replacing philosophical concerns with a play of sensibility that eluded all concepts and defied all efforts at paraphrase.

This passage (and many others like it) reminded me of what Benjamin had written about the fascinations that characterized the melancholy Baroque allegorist, whose contemplative brooding upon dead matter allowed the brooding subject to “dissolve” into the world of things. Benjamin’s analysis of Albrecht Dürer’s famous image Melancolie I in the Trauerspiel study draws special attention to the motif of the stone. But apart from these thematic parallels, I began to notice important differences between Benjamin and Walser – the fact, for example, that Benjamin had a methodological interest in melancholy that Walser did not share (or at least I found no evidence of it in his writing). Benjamin shared the Baroque allegorist’s fascination with inorganic matter and material objects, with the mute “fallenness” of nature and the abandoned and outdated objects of commodity culture, a fascination with the cipher-like quality of things that had been removed from their original context like pictures divorced from their captions. “ Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts,” Benjamin observed, “what ruins are in the realm of things” (Origin 177-78). For Benjamin, there is thus a parallel between the radical alterity of the material world and allegorical mode of apprehension that foregrounds the arbitrary relationship between objects and the meaning we attribute to those objects. Unlike the symbol, the signifying act of allegory does not

7 The phrase appears in Walser’s short piece, “Helbling’s Story” (1914), which appears in the Selected Stories.
“partake of the reality which it renders it intelligible” (to borrow Coleridge’s famous dictum). It was the Baroque Trauerspiel’s allegorical language that was expressive precisely by virtue of its failure to express. Benjamin’s version of Surrealism sought to transform melancholy into a critical method that would short-circuit the intentionality of the meaning-making subject and allow for something like a Surrealist encounter with the material object and the objective (non-atmospheric) reality of a image or scene. These encounters were moments of discovery and recognition, what Benjamin called “profane illuminations.” “Truth,” Benjamin wrote, “is the death of subjective intention” (Origins 36). In Eugène Atget’s photographs of depopulated Paris streets, for example, Benjamin noted how these proto-Surrealist images “disinfect” the scenes they capture by “drain[ing] the aura out of reality” (One-Way Street 184). This defamiliarizing technique was the basis of a recovery project. Benjamin wrote of Atget that he sought out “the mislaid, the abandoned” in photographic images that “usher in the liberation of the object from aura” (ibid). This language, by the way, is nowhere to be found in Atget’s own accounts of what he was seeking out or of what he was trying to do in his work of documentation. Benjamin was not interested in the customary critical tasks of writing an “appreciation” of Atget or promoting his documentary work; what Benjamin sought was a defamiliarizing technique that would liberate and redeem objects. It is the language of discovery and recognition, which is not to be confused with the conventional critic’s sympathetic recognition of the artist’s actual intentions. For Benjamin, Atget was not an artist so much as the producer of images exemplifying the power of a technique. Benjamin’s image-obsessed Arcades project is one attempt to apply this defamiliarizing technique to the study of cultural and historical artifacts.

Much has already been written about the often esoteric and obscure basis for this method, as Benjamin conceived it, and about the central role that melancholy and allegory play in the long gestation period of the Arcades project (the same period in which Benjamin was also drawn to Surrealism). I soon noticed that much of the best scholarly work on Benjamin’s thinking about melancholy and the relationship of that thinking to Surrealism, tended to come not from literary critics but rather from those working in the fields of history and philosophy. But the exegetical clarity of this work also made clear a fundamental problem faced by any critic who wanted to appeal to Benjamin’s thought in the reading of experimental literature. The biggest obstacle to connecting Benjamin to Walser, in fact, was the
methodological and philosophical motivation that governed Benjamin’s interest in literature. The function of critique, Benjamin claimed, was to “mortify” the work so as to “transpose it from the medium of beauty to the medium of truth – and thereby to redeem it.” Here is a particularly clear (and very early) description of Benjamin’s method by Siegfried Kracauer, in a 1930 review of Theodor Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard (an attempt to apply the method of Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study to a different period, testifying to its broad applicability as a method):

In the view of these studies [by Adorno and Benjamin] the truth-content of a work reveals itself only in its collapse … The work’s claim to totality, its systematic structure, as well as its superficial intentions share the fate of everything transient: but as they pass away with time the work brings characteristics and configurations to the fore that are actually images of truth.\(^8\)

As Kracauer’s perceptive account makes clear, this critical method treats all systematic structures – myths, theories, meta-narratives, as well as organically meaningful works of art – as if they were on the same ontological plane. The method aims to translate the work of art from the realm of meaning (not to mention beauty) into the realm of the thing-like, so that it could “share the fate of everything transient” and somehow offer up “images of truth” (what Benjamin liked to call the “truth content”) as if it were a radioactive substance with a half-life. As one extreme manifestation of this paradoxical interest in the way language can be expressive in a non-intentional way, through its failure to express, Benjamin once wrote of his aim to “deduce” the properties of the Trauerspiel genre based on his theory of allegory. Benjamin’s Baroque Trauerspiel suddenly seemed the wrong model for thinking about Walser, as did this general concept of an allegorical mode of an expressively non-expressive language. Here is where the convergence of philosophical interests and avant-garde anti-art began to seem problematic. It is one thing to talk of a fascination with the material and the thing-like as a theme of a work of art; but it is another to treat the work itself as having the status of a ruin. Almost needless to say, I saw nothing in

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\(^8\) Quoted in Hullot-Kentor’s Foreword to English edition of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard* (xv).
Walser’s language that could be “deduced” from, or explained by, any kind of theory – however fascinating or distinctly modernist that theory was.

2. “Melancholy Writes Itself”: Surrealist Simulations and the Outsider Artist

An early English-language edition of Walser’s stories (issued under the title Masquerade) reproduces on its front cover a painting by Adolf Wölfli, the famous Outsider Artist who (like Walser) spent much of his life in a Swiss asylum for the mentally ill located not far from where Walser would eventually be hospitalized. Wölfli’s work makes a striking and attractive cover image; but how accurate is the implied comparison with Walser? At first glance, Walser’s life and writing do indeed have many of the earmarks of Outsider Art. Walser ended his life in a mental hospital (where he stopped writing after 1933), and his late pencil writings crammed into the empty space on fragments of paper – receipts, rejection slips, the backs of old calendars – sometimes bear a striking resemblance to Adolf Wölfli’s intricately filled spaces, a stylistic testament to a horror vacui. Benjamin’s 1929 essay on Walser, written before Walser entered the hospital, also treated Walser as something of an Outsider Artist. It was easy to characterize melancholy writing in the same way, a “motoric” expressiveness that is a non-intentional mode of expression. Benjamin was fond of quoting a line from the seventeenth-century Baroque writer Andreas Tscherning: “Melancholy writes itself” (melancolie redet sich selber). What I

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9 By coincidence, it was Walter Morgenthaler, Adolf Wölfli’s doctor, who diagnosed Walser as schizophrenic when he first entered the Waldau Clinic. Morgenthaler would publish a brief account of his relationship with Wölfli, his most famous patient. Here is the complete text of Walter Morgenthaler’s “Medical Report on Robert Walser, Author” dated January 26, 1929 (translated in Robert Walser Rediscovered):

I found Herr Walser markedly depressed and severely inhibited. He had insight into his illness, complained about the impossibility of being able to work, about occasional fear, etc. He responded evasively about being sick of life. He would like to be helped, but would not like to enter an institution, would rather go to his sister in Bellelay. Since on external grounds this was not indicated, and, moreover, since after a short while I became convinced that in his present condition Mr. Walser needs the confines of the institution urgently, as quickly as possible, he is committed to Waldau.

10 A hospital orderly has testified, however, that he saw Walser writing much later during his stay at Herisau. No remains of those efforts have been discovered (to date).

11 The texts from the so-called “Bleistiftgebiet” of the 1920s (the “pencil period,” also known as the period of the “Microscripts”) were all written in tiny script, with an unsharpened pencil, on numerous slips of reused paper (filling up the empty space on old receipts, tickets, etc.). For many years, it was assumed they were written in an undecipherable private language.
found problematic, however, in even some of the best criticism on Walser, was the tendency to focus attention on figurative *gestures* and *language* and the *activity* of writing as expressive in a compulsive and quasi-symptomatic way.\(^\text{12}\) Susan Sontag, for example, wrote that Walser’s narratives are attempts to “convert time into space” (*Selected Stories* viii). W.G. Sebald observed that Walser’s prose is a continuous attempt to “defy gravity” (35). And Walter Benjamin, in addition to commenting that each of Walser’s sentences was an attempt to erase the memory of the preceding sentence, was attracted by the rumor that Walser never revised a sentence (which is probably untrue and, at any rate, impossible to verify).

All of these readings, including Benjamin’s, owe something to the Surrealist paradigm of Outsider Art (known also as *Art Brut*, which may be translated as “raw art”). I will have more to say in Chapter One regarding Benjamin’s concept of melancholy and its relation to the Surrealist movement. The Surrealist Outsider Art represents what is in some ways the culmination of the avant garde anti-art aesthetic, and it suggested another possible perspective from which to read Walser’s experimental melancholy writing. Surrealist Outsider Art (*or* *Art Brut*) represented a break from earlier ways of thinking about mental illness and the artist who saw farther, and in a radically different way, than his contemporaries. Emblematic of this earlier view, and of the pathological ambiguity of melancholy and depression, is William Hogarth’s eighteenth-century image of “Bedlam” from the *Rake’s Progress* series, which shows a melancholic figure sitting in Hamlet-like contemplation *apart from* the other genuinely insane patients in the asylum. Although it retained some of the pastoral idealizing of the outsider as romantic visionary (something particularly true of Jean Dubuffet), Surrealist Outsider Art was far more interested in what these artists *did*, in the patterns underlying compulsive behavior, in the looking-glass logic and reconstructive energies exhibited in fantasies of an alternate reality. And in order to qualify as an outsider artist in the Surrealist sense, the artist had to operate entirely outside convention *not being aware of* his or her status as a transgressive artist flouting those conventions. He also had to stand outside the shock industry of Dadaist *epatier le bourgeoisie*. Above all, the Surrealist Outsider Artist stayed *busy* with the activity of making things; he did not sit apart and brood upon his own outsider status. The key text for Surrealism

\(^{12}\) Prinzhorn’s scientific interpretation of symptomatic expressive features of the *kunstlerei* of the mentally ill has some kinship to Aby Warburg’s study of what he called *Pathosformeln*, or emotional states of mind that manifest themselves in formulaic and figural expressive gestures.
was Hans Prinzhorn’s Bildnerei der Geisteskranken, or The Artistry [literally, Image-Making] of the Mentally Ill (1923). Prinzhorn, a trained psychiatrist who had first-hand experience working with mentally ill patients in clinics throughout Europe, brought together and analyzed the work of artist-patients. Prinzhorn emphasized the therapeutic and symptomatic status of the work that he brought together – its kunstlerie, or “artistry,” in contrast with its status as “art” (kunst). It was a perspective perfectly suited to the interests of an anti-art avant-garde movement.

“Melancholy writes itself” sounded like the formula for generating a certain type of automatic writing – a central practice of early Surrealism about which Benjamin, strangely, had little to say. One problem was how to connect the artistry of visual and plastic art with practices in the medium of the written word. Prinzhorn’s pseudo-diagnostic method of attending to figural motifs and patterns was somewhat akin to handwriting analysis. But how does the study of images from Outsider Artists translate into the study of writing? In the 1933 manifesto titled “The Automatic Message,” and in the slightly earlier Immaculate Conception co-written by Breton and Paul Eluard with its famous section titled “The Possessions,” the Surrealist account of automatic writing merges with an interest in the exemplary status of Outsider Art. The simulations in The Immaculate Conception signify, in the brief history of Surrealism, a new development in the concept of automatic writing. The idea of simulating mental disorders, in fact, may have begun partly in response to Dali, who reportedly felt that automatic writing – in which the practitioner had to submit himself to, allow himself to be “violated” by, forces over which he had control – was far too “passive” and “feminine.”

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13 Prinzhorn’s collection of works by these artists eventually ended up in the collection of the Warburg Institute. (In Chapter One, I will touch on the parallel between Benjamin’s Arcades project and the (earlier) work of Aby Warburg.
14 Paul Klee is reported to have kept a copy of Prinzhorn in his studio in the 1920s.
15 Hal Foster notes that the romantic view of the art of the mentally ill focused on the verbal rather than the visual.
17 See Dali’s La Femme Visible (1930) and André Breton’s account of Dali’s “paranoaic-critical method” in “Surrealism and Painting.” For discussions of automatic writing and its ambiguous idealizing of the
render *patterns of thinking* that tapped into new states of consciousness and (as Breton and Eluard further claimed) would lead to new forms and genres of writing that would “replace the sonnet.” Breton even included an “endorsement” from a clinical psychologist as to the “authenticity” of the simulations, all of them composed by Breton and Eluard rather than by individuals diagnosed with these disorders. The point, however, was not to reproduce accurately; the point was to come up with a method that would allow for the discovery of new ways of structuring one’s experience of the world. The result is something more like a theory about how to *read* certain texts as exemplary (whereas automatic writing demonstrated a practice that one could emulate on one’s own).

Once again, though, the paradigm and the method seemed fundamentally inadequate in my reading of Robert Walser and what I took to be his melancholy writing. I was simply struck, first of all, by the obvious difference between Walser’s language and the language of the simulations.\(^\text{18}\) Walser, of course, was not writing a simulation of a generic state or a representation of the world as it might appear through that lens; he was modeling a reflexive *relation* to the experiences he described, modeling a consciousness subtly attuned to its own acts of articulation and description. How could one simulate second-order reflexive processes? There was one other significant feature of the Surrealist concept of outsider *writing* as it manifested itself in the method of simulation. Perhaps also under the influence of Salvador Dali, who coined the term “paranoiac-critical method,” Surrealists took *dissociative* disorders (like schizophrenia) as their central model. Surrealism naturally had more of an interest in cognitive feminine, see Conley’s *Automatic Woman* and the essays in the collection edited by Caws, Kuenzli, and Raaberg.

\(^\text{18}\) In their prefatory comment on the “Attempted Simulation of General Paralysis,” Breton and Eluard write (quoting from their consulted expert):

> Dr. Rauzy notes that “the language of paralytics is rich in superlatives, hyperbole, redundancies and repetitions” uplifted by “intense lyricism” in which “the infiltration of the demential process is shown by all sorts of absurdities and stereotypes.”

And here is the opening of the simulation itself (which might be compared with the very different language in the address to the imagined lost love in the closing pages of Walser’s “The Walk,” a story that I will examine in a later chapter):

> My great adorable woman beautiful as everything on the earth and in the most beautiful stars of the earth that I adore my great woman adored by all the powers of the stars beautiful with the beauty of the billions of queens that adorn the earth the adoration I have for your beauty brings me to me knees to beg you to think of me my adorable beauty my great beauty whom I adore I roll diamonds in the moss taller than the forests where your tallest hair thinks of me...
dissociative disorders (schizophrenia, for example) than in affective disorders such as melancholia or hyste-ria. Schizophrenia, in fact, was a relatively new concept; as late as 1930, Breton and Eluard still used Emil Kraepelin’s term *dementia praecox*. Melancholia is conspicuously absent from early stud-ies of Outsider Art, and it is not one of the mental disorders that Breton and Eluard choose to simulate in “The Possessions.”

And that led me to realize another, even more fundamental problem with Surrealists’ narrow focus on paranoia and schizophrenia. Hal Foster’s persuasive critique of the Outsider Art paradigm\(^\text{19}\) challenged the heroic model of the outsider artist as an unconsciously transgressive visionary. As Foster points out, the dissociative disorders of “overproximity” (feeling that one has lost all identity and agency, and is being controlled by external forces and violated by the threat) generate system-building efforts that, reconstruct a private Symbolic Order. Rather than representing a fundamental challenge to that order, these reconstructive efforts reproduce the system in the realm of private fantasy, and often in a more totalizing manner. As Theodor Adorno observed of Surrealist constructions more generally, “something that is supposed to be a mere dream always leaves reality untouched, whatever damage is done to its image ... there is a shattering and a regrouping, but no dissolution” (“Looking Back” 87). The schizophrenic Outsider Artist, in response to the shattering of her sense of the real world, is engaged in a compulsive “regrouping” that mimics – often in a more totalizing fashion – the social order that has been shattered. There is a reason why paranoia exists in hyphenated relation to schizophrenia.

Elias Canetti had made essentially the same point in his extended discussion\(^\text{20}\) of Daniel Paul Schreber, a famous example of schizophrenic writing, and an important example among early modernists. Schreber, whose work was published at the turn of the century under the title *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, was interesting in part because he was an “insider” who *became* an outsider following a mental collapse late in life. Prior to his mental collapse and decade-long hospitalization, Schreber served as a former high-ranking court justice in Germany. He had internalized the discourse and logic of legal argumentation, and this mastery was on full display in the obsessive precision of his wildly delusional “paranoid style” of writing, an extended *apologia* largely devoted to elaborating a conspiracy theory in

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19 In his 2001 essay “Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill” later reprinted as a chapter in *Prosthetic Gods*.

20 The discussion of Schreber forms the conclusion of his study *Crowds and Power*. 

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which he played a central role as hero and unwitting victim. In the place of totalizing and space-filling patterns, we see in Schreber’s writing the elaboration of a more or less internally coherent theory, complete with fantasies of being controlled by daemonic forces who controlled his “nerves” at a distance (through “divine rays”). Schreber did not contemplate the submissiveness of ash, but he did fantasize about being transformed into a woman and sexually violated by these unseen forces who were controlling him from a distance. And so the Schreber case was also of interest as an example of Outsider Art on account of the fact that his rigorous logic that had run of the rails (so to speak) seemed to say something important about deep contradictions within the social order of the “administered society” (to borrow Theodor Adorno’s term) in whose structure which he played a central administrative role. Based solely on the evidence of his writing, Freud published a brief early analysis of the Schreber case and concluded that he was a heroic outsider engaged in a reconstructive effort.\(^{21}\) But where Freud saw a noble reconstructive effort on the part of a fractured psyche, Canetti saw an alarming presage of the madness to come in the following century: sadistic fantasies of control and mastery, a profile of a bunker mentality, and what Canetti highlighted as the quintessential proto-fascist fantasy of being the sole survivor in the wake of an apocalyptic \textit{Götterdämmerung}.

For a brief moment, I thought this pointed the way to a somewhat different argument that would contrast, in a much more dramatic way, the affective “disorder” of melancholy with paranoid-schizophrenia as two possible responses to a dissociative sense of crisis in the culture of modernity. Walser’s melancholy writing, his clairvoyance of the small, would make a dramatic juxtaposition with Schreber’s grandiose and totalizing obsessive-compulsive fantasies. It had seemed important, at first, to read Walser’s writing as something other than a compulsive or therapeutic activity. Now it seemed important to show that it was not an attempt to retreat from the world and reconstruct an alternate reality closed off from the outside (perceived as a threat). What I saw instead was an open, even joyous, modeling of intentional states and a compositional intelligence testing out new orientations toward the world. Walser’s writing was creative, not compulsively reconstructive. The real challenge was not to find some basis for distinguishing melancholy writing from schizophrenic writing; the problem had more to do

\(^{21}\) Freud, it seems, felt it was important to appreciate the distinction between schizophrenia and paranoia, the former a hallucinatory \textit{sense} of chaos within and without, the latter a reconstructive \textit{response} to that disorder. Freud preferred the term \textit{paraphrenia} (“para” obviously suggesting “outside”) to the term schizophrenia.
with the essential passivity of activity that could be simulated, as opposed to the active play of the intelligence that I saw being modeled in what I (still) vaguely identified as melancholy writing. All of this, however, still required “diagnosing” generic states and disorders, and it meant reading specific passages as merely symptomatic of features that were defined ahead of time. The real problem was one of agency, not the experimental merits of one disorder in comparison with another or some opposition between passive and active, the intentional and the compulsive. The central question about Outsider Art, for me, was whether the work of Outsider Artists simply registered problems in their culture, or whether it could in some sense (or in any sense) represent a real challenge to the values of that culture.

For all its problems, the Outsider Art paradigm did succeed in registering what I saw as an important feature of modernist period. Like modernist artists’ fascination with primitive art, the Outsider Art paradigm was motivated by a sense that there was something deeply wrong in post-enlightenment thinking. It conceived of modernist experimentation as a heroic endeavor in response to a perceived cultural crisis.22 Daniel Paul Schreber may or may not have pointed a way out of the crisis of his culture; but his vividly documented mental collapse seemed to many a symptomatic response to a deeper crisis. I thought of Nietzsche, who experienced a mental collapse himself, but who is perhaps most responsible for giving modernists a dissociation of sensibility narrative and a sense of the world-historical urgency of finding alternatives to the values that had come to dominate Western culture. Even Surrealism’s aim of overcoming a cultural dissociation of sensibility to achieve an alternate Surreality, beyond rational logic and beyond good and evil, is clear evidence of Nietzsche’s influence. The figure of Nietzsche raised a new set of questions, though. My assumption, as well as my underlying motivation, was to treat Walser and Benjamin (in spite of the divergent interests I have noted) as representing an attractive alternative to versions of modernism that I associated with a Nietzschean will to power and the entrepreneurial ambition

22 One of the more striking examples of this sense of crisis, and the Nietzschean tension between order and chaos, comes from Aby Warburg, who understood the challenge of creating distance on a personal and cultural level:

The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization. When this interval becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function which, in its rhythmical change between absorption in its object or detached restraint, signifies the oscillation between a cosmology of images and one of signs; its adequacy or failure as an instrument of mental orientation signifies the fate of human culture. (Warburg)
to “make it new.” If “God is the opposite of Rodin,” as Walser once quipped, then it was tempting to think of Walser as the opposite of Nietzsche’s Übermensch — as the “anti-Nietzsche.” Max Brod, a close friend of Kafka and another early reader of Walser, succinctly captured this sentiment in his claim that “after Nietzsche, there had to be Walser.” But was this opposition the right way of understanding the crisis and the options available? In what sense did Nietzsche make Walser seem “necessary”?

3. Modernism, Avant-garde Anti-art, and How to Stop Doing Philosophy

At this point I experienced something of an epiphany that set my project on an entirely different path. It was Nietzsche, I found, who offered the most compelling account of the crisis that modernists like Walser were trying to overcome and which Schreber’s collapse seemed to exemplify. At this point, I began to entertain a new set of questions. In what sense can Walser’s work be thought of as *philosophical* writing? What does it mean to say that after Nietzsche there *had* to be Walser? Does Walser overcome philosophy, as Nietzsche envisioned, and replace philosophy with aesthetic articulation as value? In other words, is he in some way the fulfillment of Nietzsche’s effort? Walser critic Christopher Middleton

23 makes some tantalizing comments on Walser that suggest how (and why) we might read him in a philosophical context. Middleton writes, for example, of Walser’s “non-conceptual apprehension of the world.” and his “uncanny power of seeing things without the interference of a limiting concept.” And perhaps the comment that stood out the most: “Because he is gay, critics who care only to confront works whose discursiveness springs from profound *ennui* and melancholy should not call him irresponsible; for his gaiety is a conquest of the vacuum. A conquest which could not have been made were not the healing of doubt the sign that doubt has been understood” (117). This sounded like a therapeutic and philosophical project — a demonstrated power of seeing things, moreover, that had nothing to do with a Will to Truth. It made Benjamin’s comment that Walser sounds like a post-convalescent (viewing the world as a “perpetual miracle” as Christian Morgenstern put it) sound like

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23 Middleton is not only one of the best translators of Walser, but also among his most perceptive readers. Middleton’s earliest work on Walser from the 1950s, some of it written while he was still alive, remains arguably the finest criticism on Walser.
Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. The question is how Walser goes about it differently, perhaps with even greater success than Nietzsche imagined.

And that is how I finally arrived at the basic outline of the following study, which begins with Benjamin and Surrealism in Chapter One but then takes a sharp turn to consider Nietzsche, James, and Emerson – three philosophers whose efforts to overcome philosophy and replace it with experimental writing are intimately connected with their experimental concepts of melancholy. Walser became a “test case” for what these philosophers were envisioning. Chapter One concludes with Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s Surrealism and his implicit call for an aesthetics of Surrealism not bound to philosophical interests or explanations; and I take this impasse and this call as my point of departure for exploring how Nietzsche and James, anti-philosophers who imagined alternatives to philosophical values, arrive at something like to alternative to Benjamin and an answer that might have satisfied Adorno.

William James, along with Nietzsche, is the most important early modernist philosopher to diagnose and attempt to overcome the crisis of value of an epistemic culture. I also came to realize that Emerson plays a pivotal role in James’s concept of melancholy, which does not seem (at first) as radical as Emerson’s or Nietzsche’s. I was intrigued by how difficult it is to connect James with the modernist experiments he is so often connected with. James is the ideal abnormal psychologist. But he is much more than that, as I hope to show by the end of this study. He offers, among other things, what I see as a radically different model for reading Outsider Art, one based on modeling states as opposed to simulating them. With James, I faced a similar challenge as I did with Walser: How to make a case for him as “radical” in the same way that Nietzsche or Emerson or even Benjamin may be thought of as radical thinkers. The more I read James alongside Nietzsche, the more I relished the prospect of making that case for James.

Perhaps the most unusual detour is a full chapter on Ralph Waldo Emerson and a reading of his essay “Experience.” The status of Emerson as a philosopher and his influence on Nietzsche are taken for granted today in a way they were not a generation ago (thanks largely to the efforts of Stanley Cavell). Critic Quentin Anderson puts it bluntly: “Emerson comes before Nietzsche.” (169). The revolution in thinking that we associate with Nietzsche begins in America, not Europe – although the proper context for this revolution is European and involves the conceptual history of melancholy as well as post-Cartesian
philosophy. I see Nietzsche as a “missing link” between Emerson and modernist experimental writing (such as Walser’s). For Nietzsche, on the other side of the Atlantic, Emerson offered a model of how to convert philosophical skepticism into a method. “I think well of all skepticism to which I may reply: ‘Let us try it,’” Nietzsche writes in one of the aphorisms of *The Gay Science*. “But I no longer want to hear anything of all those questions which do not permit experiments: for there courage has lost its rights” (*Basic Writings* 236). Strangely, though, the case still needs to be made for Emerson’s significance for modernist experimental writing (via Nietzsche), as well as his important place in the European discourse on melancholy. In Chapter Four, I will devote special attention to Emerson’s essay “Experience” as an anticipation of Nietzsche as well as a watershed moment in the thinking about melancholy.

Nietzsche and James (preceded by Emerson) represent a generation of philosophers who recognized philosophy itself as the problem to overcome, and who recognized the need for new practices to replace philosophical values. As an instructive example of recent philosophical reading that retains these philosophical values, I could point to Simon Critchley’s reading of Wallace Stevens, that most philosophical of modernist American poets, in his recent book-length study *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Critchley argues that Stevens’s later poetry develops a new realism in which “poetry can be brought closer to the plain sense of things, to things in their remoteness from us and our intentions” (84). Stevens’ poetry thus becomes a poetic vehicle for a philosophical thought experiment imagining the way the world might look without us. In its philosophical search for the Real and for what Stevens calls “the something wholly other,” Stevens’ poetry also articulates what Critchley calls as “the desire to be cured of the need for poetry” (83). I was struck by the difference between

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24 In spite of the fact that much good work has been done on Emerson in relation to Nietzsche, I have fundamental reservations about what I am tempted call (borrowing a term from William James) the orthodoxy of “healthy-minded” Emersonian criticism. My chief antagonist is the late Richard Rorty, neo-pragmatist philosopher-provocateur. In Rorty’s reading of Nietzsche in connection with Emerson, he picks up on Emerson’s “way of life by abandonment” which is “wonderful” and Emerson’s pursuit of “romance” (in the famous closing line of “Experience”). Rorty, however, has little sense of what is at stake. As Schreber and Walser and many others have appreciated, the way of life by abandonment is not so wonderful *unless* there is a game plan for embracing nihilism and living one’s life with a viable model for creating new value. To come after Nietzsche is to find a way to deal with what Nietzsche called “the most terrible demand ever made of humanity.” I think Rorty misreads not only Nietzsche, but Emerson as well. It was Emerson – anticipating Nietzsche’s sense of what was at stake in the response to nihilism, on both a personal and a cultural level – who once observed that the dissolution of personality could lead to “feel[ing] oneself God in the world or a weed by the road.” (*Emerson, of course, wrote elsewhere – in an –oft-quoted line – that a weed is a plant “whose virtues have not yet been discovered.”*)
Critchley’s philosophical point of view on Stevens’s melancholy modernism and what I saw as the interests that motivated the modernist philosophers I wanted to study. Critchley imagines the desire to stop doing poetry from a philosophical vantage point; Nietzsche and James, in their different ways, look for a path to what Wittgenstein called “the real discovery ... the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to—the one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented.” These sounded like diametrically opposed projects. The most concise expression of the difference in perspectives that I am aware of comes from critic Charles Altieri, who (in his recent book on Stevens) writes of the quantum shift that occurs when we replace the question of “what does it take to know the world” with the question “what difference does it make for our sense of the world to be concerned with knowing it in particular ways?” James and Nietzsche were the first to reframe the question in this way. In the case of Nietzsche, moreover, the answer to the second question involves replacing philosophical concerns with aesthetic practices. While conventional philosophy all too often aligns itself with an anti-

25 Critchley does stand apart from a number of past philosophical readings of Stevens that have tended to emphasize a thematic existential response to nihilism. David Bromwich’s essay on Stevens in relation to models of heroism in Nietzsche and William James is one early example of this tendency. In Stevens and the Interpersonal, Mark Halliday connects Stevens’s personal loneliness with an ontological and cosmic aloneness: “[Stevens] was comforted by the implication that a man physically alone and emotionally alone is really just an obvious illustration or literalization of the constant reality of man’s ontological and cosmic aloneness, and that a person’s wishes for relationships with other persons are thus misguided and not susceptible of fulfillment by any act of the will” (68). Taking issue with Halliday’s reading, George Lensing (in Wallace Stevens and the Seasons, which ranks among the best philosophical criticism of Stevens) argues rather that “the aloneness of Stevens’ winter poems is an act of the will; it does have a purpose. It is much more than a morbid surrender to a personal existential angst” (130).

26 In response to Critchley’s study, Altieri makes the astute observation that Stevens’s poems “do not want us to escape poetry but to test its power to build modes of response adequate to the stripped down world the poems confront” (22). I fully concur with this statement, although this notion of “testing the power of poetry” to build “[adequate] modes of response” sounds more like William James’s concept of “power” than Nietzsche’s. I believe Altieri gives rather short shrift to William James in comparison with his sometimes uncritical discussions of Nietzsche. I imagine myself in dialogue with Altieri in an effort to argue for James’s significance in a way that he might find persuasive.

In general, however, I sympathize with most of what Altieri has to say about modernism, and any reader of his work will recognize how indebted I am to Altieri’s decades-long work and his admirable effort to combine the study of literature with philosophy without making aesthetic values subordinate to philosophical interests. In his early writings on Emerson and Nietzsche, Stanley Cavell called for a “philosophical poetry.” But it is Altieri who, in his study of Wallace Stevens, gives what I think is the best critical account of what that philosophical poetry might look like as literature (and not just as the subject matter for literature or in a way that makes literature a vehicle for philosophy). Poems qualify as “philosophical poetry,” Altieri writes, “not because of their content but because we recognize in their work a certain kind of ambition to take philosophy seriously as a discipline and so as a constraint on the imagination, which also becomes a stimulus for the imagination” (2).

27 I would also say that replacing these concerns entails a switch from Breton’s question “Who am I?” (the question that opens his novel-essay Nadja) with Emerson’s “Where do we find ourselves?” (the question which opens his essay “Experience”).

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art aesthetics, adopting an imperialist stance that seeks to make art subordinate to its own interests, Nietzsche wants to replace philosophy with a transformed concept of art.

It therefore seemed important to get this narrative right, to tell the story of modernism’s overcoming of philosophy as part of the story of modernism itself. My challenge in this study is to study melancholy within a philosophical context, but not from a limited philosophical point of view. Walser became a test case for what these philosophers were aiming for, philosophers for whom overcoming epistemology and transforming melancholy were linked projects. I am also attracted by the idea of making a case for the philosophical significance of Walser in something like Nietzschean terms – not as an allegorical anti-hero, not by dealing with philosophical themes, but by modeling acts of value creation that are incommensurable with (but at the same time a challenge to) epistemic values. I found philosophy a congenial (though challenging) discipline for a student of modernist literature. Some of the most perceptive accounts of modernism that I knew were from philosophers. In addition to what Benjamin and Adorno had to say about the melancholia of Proust and Baudelaire, one of the best accounts of the complex relationship between experimental art and mental disorder is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s essay on Cézanne and what he calls his “schizothymia.” More than that: They were so good on modernism because they fully appreciated the cultural crisis and the problems these artists were seeking to overcome. As philosophers, they had a keen sense for what it meant to want to escape philosophical problems, which they understood (moreover) as cultural problems. This suggested that there was a parallel crisis among a generation of philosophers and artists; they were reacting to manifestations of the same underlying problem (however it was identified). I came to realize that many of the major figures developing this experimental modernism were philosophers, or at least have philosophical significance by virtue of their attempt to move beyond philosophical problems and (in some sense) beyond traditional philosophy altogether: Emerson, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, James. They are also fascinating experimental writers, producing works that should rank high in the canon of world literature: Ecce Homo, James’s Varieties of Religious Experience, Emerson’s essays, Wittgenstein’s works, and of course Benjamin’s writing (whom Adorno made a point of calling a “great essayist”) – all are landmarks in experimental writing every bit as important as Un Coup de Dés or Tender Buttons. In this case, there was little basis for distinguishing between primary and secondary texts. It was all experimental literature; and
the more it seemed to address philosophical concerns, as well as the desire to stop doing philosophy, the more exciting it seemed as literature.

4. Essayism and Melancholy Writing

Modernist philosophy had done a good job of establishing a narrative of the disenchantment of modernity that I believe is important for understanding the pressures that gave birth to modernist art and literature. Philosophy also helped me to appreciate another early modern response to disenchantment, an alternative to Benjamin’s Trauerspiel as well as a later model for experimental/philosophical writing: the essay. Ilit Ferber exemplifies a recent interest among philosophers in melancholy within the history of philosophical thought. Ferber notes two paradoxical qualities that have made melancholy attractive to philosophers: its detachment and its self absorption. These, of course, are not only some of the qualities I wanted to account for in Walser; they are also the paradoxical features, or parameters, that define the essay as Montaigne first conceived it. Virtually all of the texts I consider in the following are essays or at least essay-like. Walser was a feuilletonist, an essayist who wrote ephemeral pieces for newspapers that were prototypes of the New Yorker’s anonymous “Talk of the Town” piece. His early novel Jakob von Gunten more is written in the essayistic genre of the Tagebuch (“Daybook”). The modernist writer Robert Musil (yet another early fan of Walser) had coined the term “essayism” to describe a philosophical mode of modernist experimental writing – a way of writing “without the interference of a limiting concept.” But the most important modernist account of the essay comes from Adorno, and I will read his “Essay as Form” in Chapter One alongside the essay “Looking Back on Surrealism,” his simultaneous critique of Benjamin’s avant-garde concept of melancholy as method and the philosophical premises underlying Surrealist anti-art.

I want to take seriously Montaigne’s essay as a model for modernist experimental writing, as seriously as Emerson and Nietzsche did, not only because we can cast Montaigne in a narrative of disenchantment as an alternative to the Trauerspiel, but (more importantly) because he outlines a role for writing and self-reflexive articulation as a means of realizing these values. The advent of the modern essay, for which Montaigne is largely responsible, is also intimately connected historically with the early modern history of melancholy, and we need to understand why that is so. Montaigne famously wrote that
to philosophize is to learn how to die. His entire philosophical project, moreover, his inwardly reflexive investigation of himself, was inspired by the loss of a close friend, who (as Montaigne writes) “took me with him.”

But rather than necessitate a process of mourning, this personal loss inaugurated an open-ended investigative endeavor in which melancholy plays a central role. Montaigne wrote candidly about many things, so we should not be surprised to find in his essays themselves a statement of the genesis behind his experimental project. Here is another testament, from Montaigne’s letter to Mme. D’Estissac (later included in the *Essais*):

> It was a melancholy humor, and consequently a humor very hostile to my natural disposition, produced by the gloom of the solitude into which I had cast myself some years ago, that first put into my head this daydream of meddling with writing. And then, finding myself entirely destitute and void of any other matter, I presented myself to myself for argument and subject. (278)

The self-reflexive playfulness of this passage, entirely characteristic of Montaigne’s voice, should not obscure the movements of a highly complex sense of agency – a complexity that reminded me, in fact, of Walser’s voice. The melancholy humor is produced by a state that “he cast himself into” was at the same time visited upon him. This make me think of Walser’s Jakob von Gunten, who at the beginning of the novel announces that “he has contrived to become a mystery to myself.” And we see more of this language in this remarkable passage:

> Lately when I retired to my home, determined so far as possible to bother about nothing except spending the little time I have left in rest and seclusion, it seemed to me I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it entertain itself in full idleness and stay and settle in itself, which I hoped it might do more easily now, having become weightier and riper with

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28 That friend was the poet Étienne de La Boétie, who died in 1563. For more on this experience and its significance for Montaigne’s writing, see Donald Frame’s introduction to his translated edition of the *Essais*. Frame suggests that the *Essais* were his “means of communication” following the loss and that “the reader takes the place of the dead friend” (v).

29 Jean Starobinski also draws special attention to this passage in his classic study of Montaigne.
time. But I find – *Ever idle hours breed wandering thoughts* (Lucan) – that, on the contrary, like a runaway horse, it gives a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose, that in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure, I have begun to put them in writing, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself. (278)

There are at least three impersonal agents at play here in this intensely self-reflexive writing: *the I, the mind, and the writing*. Montaigne wants to let his mind entertain itself in its idleness. But that is not what happens. The mind runs away from him, like a wild horse (perhaps an allusion to Plato’s parable of the horse-drawn chariot). Finally, one must let it go. The project takes an oddly masochistic turn, in an effort to make his own mind "ashamed of itself." All of this gives birth to the “filigree work of articulation” (as Nietzsche phrased it), which can establish new forms of agency and new forms of power as the mind feels itself in motion, actively contemplating its own strangeness, *assaying* (trying out) new orientations and simultaneously taking command while letting go.

This is close to the kind of serious play I see in Walser – “serious” in the sense of philosophically significant. The passages quoted above also sound remarkably Nietzschean in spirit. Many years ago, Hugo Friedrich made the connection much more explicitly: “Rather than a will to power,” he claimed, “Montaigne developed a will to powerlessness.” But we need to be careful about how we read this kind of aphoristic generalization. I would suggest that Montaigne’s will to play is far from passive, and it is not opposed to Nietzschean power; it simply another form of power in relation to the world. And rather than a conventional genre or a fixed form, the essay is best thought of as a literary mode, which one critic defines in the most general but also most Nietzschean terms as the space of articulation that establishes a “power in relation to the world.” “*Que sçay-je?*” Montaigne famously asked: “what do I know?” Taking their cue from this causal and ambiguously worded question, Nietzsche and Emerson and James take us through a process of mourning that goes beyond good and evil, beyond questions of what we know and what can be known, literally beyond belief.

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30 Friedrich calls this the method of “self-abasement.”
31 Angus Fletcher, who is also the author of a classic work on allegory as mode and genre.
So much for the long process which led me to my final constellation of experimental writers and thinkers. Now for a brief word on my chosen title, which I have taken from an (appropriately) obscure piano piece, “Désespoir Agréable,” written as an academic exercise\(^\text{32}\) by someone who was neither an essayist nor a writer at all, but – as he preferred to call himself – a “phonometrician” (“measurer of sounds”).\(^\text{33}\) Like Walser and the painter Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie both anticipates and stands outside the major avant-garde developments of the early twentieth century.\(^\text{34}\) Satie initiated many of the main movements and currents of modernism, and not just in music: Dada, Surrealism, impressionism, neoclassicism, the techniques of collage and pastiche. And yet, Satie stands in an odd relation to the avant-garde innovations with which he is associated; his work was a “provocation from the periphery” by someone who remained perpetually on the periphery and refused to belong to any group that would have him as a member (or dare to adopt him as their patron saint).\(^\text{35}\)

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\(^{32}\) At the age of 40, Satie had decided to go back to school at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. He was studying there, doing simple assignments among students half his age, at around the time Walser was writing about the Benjamenta Institute in *Jakob von Gunten*.

\(^{33}\) The epigraph from Robert Walser that appears at the head of this introduction is thus very close to Satie’s brand of absurdist humor. The parallels extend further. Walking, sometimes long distances, was the preferred mode of travel for both Satie and Walser. Roger Shattuck speculated that “the source of Satie’s sense of musical beat—the possibility of variation within repetition, the effect of boredom on the organism—may be this endless walking back and forth across the same landscape day after day . . . the total observation of a very limited and narrow environment” (in Orledge 69).

\(^{34}\) The term “Surrealism,” for example, was first coined by Apollinaire in his review of Satie’s 1917 ballet *Parade*. The role of Satie in the transition from Dada to Surrealism tends to be underappreciated, in part because Breton had as little interest in music as he did in the theater. Satie participated in a mock trial and condemnation of Breton in 1922; Breton returned the favor two years later when he organized a booing and catcalling response at the premiere of Satie’s experimental ballet *Relache* (which was also a pioneering film soundtrack, to add one more item to Satie’s avant-garde resume). Such incidents indicate how strangely self-reflexive and insular these scandals and provocations had become in the post-Dada years of the 1920s.

\(^{35}\) Maurice Ravel credited Satie’s importance and captured his paradoxical role as an avant-garde outsider in a 1928 public lecture given while on tour in America (three years after Satie’s death):

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Another significant influence, somewhat unique ... is that of Erik Satie, which has had appreciable effect upon Debussy, myself, and indeed most of the modern French composers. Satie was possessed of an extremely keen intelligence. His was the inventor’s mind par excellence. He was a great experimenter [and] these experiments have been of inestimable value. Simply and ingenuously, Satie pointed the way, but as soon as another musician took to the trail he had indicated, Satie would immediately change his own orientation and without hesitation open up still another path to new fields of experimentation. He thus became the inspiration of countless progressive tendencies. (in Orenstein 45)

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modernist Outsider Artist as Walser or Wölfli. “I came into the world very young, in an age that was very old.” Satie wrote. Around the same time Nietzsche was celebrating Bizet’s Carmen as a life-affirming and vigorous alternative to the symptomatic decadence of Wagnerian music and “The Case of Wagner.” Satie was composing brief piano pieces that represent a quite different response to Wagner, while urging his friend, Claude Debussy, to write music with “less sauerkraut.” I sometimes wonder how Nietzsche would have responded, for example, to hearing Satie’s Socrate. I wonder also how James might have responded to the odd variety of religious experience that is the ultimate resolution to James’s distinction between organized religion and the religious experience of the individual: Satie’s church with one member, himself, which he named “The Metropolitan Church of Jesus the Conductor.” Like much of Satie’s work, this has the appearance of being either a contrived joke or the very epitome of Outsider Art— or both. In his eccentric behavior as well as in his work, Satie invites the label of Outsider Artist to an even greater extent that Walser. Satie’s music, moreover, along with his occasional dandy-ish quips on the aesthetics of boredom, have encouraged later music critics to describe his experiments as if they were simulations of mental states— the musical analogue of Surrealist simulations, but composed by an authentic outsider artist. At the top of the one-page score to his piano work Vexations (which, like a good deal of Walser’s work, was unpublished during his lifetime), Satie notoriously laid out pre-conditions for the performer that are eccentric, to say the least: “In order to play this motif 840 times,” Satie instructed, “one would have to prepare oneself in advance, and in the utmost silence, through serious immobilities.” Conveniently ignoring the ambiguous hypothetical phrase “would have to,” many

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36 In the collection published as Nietzsche contra Wagner, Nietzsche referred to Wagner as “our greatest melancholic in music.”
37 Debussy himself once told Jean Cocteau that Satie’s ideas were a decisive influence on the aesthetic of Pelleas and Melisande [1893-95]. Satie is reported to have said: “There is no need for the orchestra to grimace when a character comes on the stage. Do the trees in the scenery grimace? What we have to do is to create a musical scenery, a musical atmosphere in which the characters move and talk” (in Myers 32-33). And so, in spite of the lingering Wagnerian style in Pelleas, we might say that Debussy’s opera benefited from a melancholic vantage point quite different from Wagner’s transcendental idealism, and closer to the allegorist’s mortifying apprehension of the thing-like and what Benjamin called “mute, fallen nature.”
38 Writing of Vexations, music historian Robert Orledge claims that “in retrospect the piece now seems as important to the development of twentieth-century music as Schoenberg’s Erwartung or the minutely crafted serial works of Webern. Indeed, it was not until after World War II that audiences were really in a position to appreciate the true audacity of Vexations, which lay in its concept of ‘anti-art’ and in the way that the deliberate boredom induced by its multiple repetitions made listeners increasingly aware of the sounds of their surrounding environment.” Orledge is referring to composer John Cage’s notorious 1952 piece 4’33, inspired by Vexations (which Cage had rediscovered).
performers (in the wake of John Cage’s re-discovery of the piece) have read these as literal (even practical) instructions for both the performer and audience, something between a Buddhist mantra and installation art. Some have even interpreted the title *Vexations* as a play on the word “variations” (in the musical sense); at least one critic has read Satie’s extended, though not quite eternal, recurrence of the same as a parody of Wagner’s grandiose *Ring* cycle and the Wagnerian ideal of an “endless melody.”

I am convinced that, at his best, Satie is not a joke, or at least not in any simple way, and that his musical language takes us far beyond the conventional opposition between the serious and the frivolous. I am also convinced that the critical paradigm of simulating moods or mental states, like boredom or melancholia, is fundamentally inadequate for understanding Satie, in much the same way it fails to tell us much about Walser’s writing. (I will try to envision an adequate alternative in the course of this study.) But a deeper kinship exists between them beyond their joint resistance to a critical paradigm. If there are any modernists who “made melancholy cheerful,” it is Walser and Satie. In arguing for Walser’s significance, I feel that I am also arguing implicitly for the image of modernism that Satie represents. It was no surprise to me, then, when I read Christopher Middleton’s description of Walser as “touching fingertips” with Satie. In his fictional meditation on Walser, Guy Davenport imagines an encounter between Satie, Walser, and William James. Such coincidences, giving a sort of uncanny validation after the fact, strongly appealed to my own Surrealist sensibility. These chance associations do not constitute an argument, of course; but they can make one’s question-driven argument seem, in retrospect, an instance of what André Breton called “objective chance” or an example of what William James called our response to the questions that the world poses to us.

**CODA**

I have spent the better part of a decade working on this project. Only now, in retrospect, do I fully appreciate the personal risk of placing myself, for an extended period of time, in the company of thinkers who were all born under the sign of Saturn. They are all fascinating melancholics, each in a different way. But they are also the worst possible role models for someone trying to finish a dissertation and enter a profession. Nietzsche was awarded a professorship, only to retire from it after five years; Walter
Benjamin may have intentionally sabotaged his own doctoral defense so as to hold open the possibility a freelance existence; and William James had deep reservations about his status as an academic and spent several years in Hamlet-like indecision over whether and at what point he should seize the opportunity to make his exit. It took James more than a decade to deliver the manuscript for *Principles of Psychology* that he was contracted to write. The final manuscript amounted to well over a thousand pages in published form. In order to find use as a textbook, his publisher had to bring out an abridged version of the book (affectionately known as “Little Jimmy”). At least James *finished* what he was commissioned to write: Benjamin’s *Arcades* project remained a mass of notes.

Nietzsche, James, and Benjamin all voiced a sometimes belligerent contempt for scholarly endeavors and what Nietzsche called the professional coterie of “scholarly oxen.” This is surely one manifestation of their own melancholy temperament and the familiar complex of the self-loathing scholar (also known to afflict the graduate student) and the variant of melancholy that Nietzsche famously anatomized as *resentment*. Four centuries ago, at the dawn of European modernity, Francis Bacon compared scholastic thinkers and humanist scholars to spiders who “make webs out of their own substance,” and he contrasted the inwardsness of the scholar with the vigorously engaged activity of the empirical scientist. Much like “melancholy writes itself,” the Baconian motto for the Royal Society – *Nullis in verbum*, or “nothing in words” – might also serve as a slogan for any anti-art aesthetic. It may be impossible to share, let alone argue for, the quaint faith that modernists had in art and its power to change the world, and it is just as difficult to defend the role of the scholar in the society in which he belongs and from which he is supposed to stand apart (often not very convincingly). I do, however, see an attractive model for both experimental art and scholarly work in the melancholy writing of early modern essayists like Robert Burton and Thomas Browne (both of whom were scholars by profession). I see in the work of William James, for example, the same essay-like freedom and the same speculative spirit and sense of play; *Principles of Psychology* has much in common with Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Browne’s *Musaeum Clasum* (“Sealed Museum”). Walser’s disillusionment with ash has a distant cousin in

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39 In an inadvertently confessional moment, James once wrote that “there is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision.” A series of diary entries between October and December of 1905 record James’s own misery over his inability to decide whether to resign his professorship at Harvard: “Nov. 3: *Resign!* Nov. 4: *Resign?* Nov. 6: *Doubtful about resigning.* Nov. 7: *Resign!* Nov. 8: *Don’t resign!* Nov. 9: *Resign!*” (Richardson Raelstrom 464) The drama of indecisiveness recorded here would drag on for another six weeks.
Burton’s “Digression of Air.” Theodor Adorno once observed that essayists are driven by a “childlike fascination that catches fire on what others have done.” Burton and Browne and Montaigne were among the first to respond to what was becoming the dominant Baconian paradigm, a cultural turn that Max Weber (and Adorno) would later call the “disenchantment of modernity.” I do think a convincing case can be made for recognizing that the cultural crisis Montaigne faced is the same context in which to understand modernism, and that this context allows us to more fully appreciate the urgency with which modernists sought new sources of value in response. “Que sçay-je?” Modernists revived this question and gave it the revolutionary ring it once had. Writing with a sense of historical urgency, but making no claim or demand for moral accountability, Nietzsche viewed the essays of Montaigne and Emerson as examples of a value-creating mode of skepticism, as a viable alternative – an active alternative – to the industrious nihilism of Baconian instrumental reason. In the end, my most surprising discovery of all was that the ultimate anti-Nietzsche was Nietzsche himself, that the cheerful fatalist and epitome of the anti-philosopher was as “full of skepsis and possibilities” as was his mentor, Emerson (Basic Writings 795). Among those imagined and implied possibilities, I am especially drawn to Nietzsche’s interpretation of the story of Ariadne and Dionysus as a counter-myth to the heroic mountain-climbing of Zarathustra. The image of patient hands feeling their way along a thread which leads through a dark labyrinth (leading somewhere, though one knows not where) seems also a fitting metaphor for the essay and its searching, experimental play of the intelligence. The end of a melody is not necessarily its goal, as Nietzsche once

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40 “Has anyone else understood Ariadne as I have?” Nietzsche writes in Ecce Homo. One modernist artist who certainly did understand the Ariadne myth was Giorgio De Chirico. Images of Ariadne appear no less than eight times in his paintings between 1910 and 1920. Of all early modernist artists, De Chirico is the most obsessively (and ambivalently) Nietzschean. Melancholy, moreover, is a constant theme in his early work. Here is Paolo Baldacci on the significance of the myth of Ariadne’s thread and the labyrinth for the modernist aesthetic of De Chirico’s Metaphysical paintings:

The Ariadne of Nietzsche and de Chirico is the Ariadne abandoned by Theseus, awaiting the arrival of Dionysus. She is the soul prepared to face the Labyrinth, exemplary symbol, philosophically speaking, of the rejection of the traditional notions of knowledge. The desire to know and understand the world, as defined by Cartesian logic, grows out of a need for security which Nietzsche labels as cowardice. Security demands stability and order, and excludes all that is variable and confusing. As such, the desire for knowledge holds as its goal the defeat of Chaos and of Time, represented by the Labyrinth and the Minotaur. But, Nietzsche asks himself, are there any true realities beyond Chaos and Time, or are they mere fictions, born of the fear of seeing the world as it really is – which is to say contradictory and unstable? [...] In our need for security and our lack of courage, most of us avoid the Labyrinth, while Nietzsche urges following Ariadne’s thread back to
its heart, back to the corporeal soul and its silent discourse, even if such a voyage risks ending in a shipwreck of the mind. (138)

Most analyses of De Chirico naturally focus on his paintings. But De Chirico’s interest in Nietzsche and the myth of Ariadne extends beyond his paintings. Here is the remarkable concluding passage from De Chirico’s one and only experimental novel, *Hebdomeros*, which John Ashbery (in his brief introduction to the English translation) called perhaps the finest Surrealist narrative, and which reads as an extended meditation on Nietzschean themes from a Surrealist perspective, as well as a spiritual allegory of the way that art (like the union of Ariadne and Dionysis) can “give philosophy peace” (note also the passing allusion to Dürer’s winged melancholy):

And once more it was desert and the night. Once again all slept in immobility and silence. Suddenly Hebdomeros saw that this woman had the eyes of his father; and he understood. She spoke of immortality in the great starless night.

‘Oh, Hebdomeros,’ she said. ‘I am Immortality. Nouns have their gender, or rather their sex, as you once said with much finesse, and the verbs, alas, decline. Have you ever thought of my death? Have you ever thought of the death of my death? Have you thought of my life? One day, O brother....’

But she spoke no further. Seated on the trunk of a broken column, she placed a hand gently on his shoulder, and with the other clasped the hand of the hero. Hebdomeros, his elbow on the ruin and his chin in his hand, pondered no longer ... His thoughts, in the pure breath of that voice that he had heard, yielded slowly and ended by abandoning him altogether. They surrendered to the caressing waves of unforgettable words, and on these waves they floated toward strange and unknown shores. They floated in the warmth of the setting sun, smiling in its descent toward the cerulean skies ...

Meanwhile, between the sky and the vast stretch of the seas, green islands, marvelous islands, passed slowly, as pass the ships of a squadron before the admiral, while a long sacred procession of heavenly birds, of an immaculate whiteness, flew by singing.
Chapter One: Walter Benjamin, Surrealism and Melancholy as Method

Hebdomeros distrusted originality, and likewise imagination: One should not gallop too fast in the saddle of fantasy, - he used to say - What one must do instead is discover, for in discovering, life is rendered possible only insofar as it is reconciled with its mother, Eternally; in discovering, one pays tribute to that minotaur known to men as Time.

Giorgio de Chirico, Hebdomeros (240)

Forgetfulness, by rolling my memories along in its tide, has done more than merely wear them down or consign them to oblivion. The profound structure it has created out of the fragments allows me to achieve a more stable equilibrium, and to see a clearer pattern. One order has been replaced by another. Between these two cliffs, which preserve the distance between my gaze and its object, time, the destroyer, has begun to pile up rubble. Sharp edges have been blunted and whole sections have collapsed: periods and places collide, are juxtaposed or are inverted, like strata displaced by the tremors on the crust of an aging planet. Some insignificant detail belonging to the distant past may stand out like a peak, while whole layers of my past have disappeared without trace. Events without any apparent connection, and originating from incongruous periods and places, slide one over the other and suddenly crystallize into a sort of edifice which seems to have been conceived by an architect wider than my personal history.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (36-37)

In his critical study examining the work of Walter Benjamin, Rilke, W.G. Sebald, and other twentieth-century writers, Eric Santner gives the following account of two “competing” concepts of melancholy that have emerged at the end of the century. “On the one hand,” Santner writes,
	here is the ethical claim [that] melancholy is the only affective posture that can maintain fidelity to those losses that the reigning ideological formation would like to disavow. Whereas mourning, which culminates in a reattachment of libido to new objects of desire (or idealization) proves to be an ultimately adaptive strategy to the governing reality principle and the demand to “get on with life,” melancholy retards adaptation and attaches itself to loss; it says no to life without the object (or ideal) and thereby – so it is claimed – holds open the possibility of alternative frameworks of what counts as reality (i.e., the possibility of a reality that does not require such losses or require that they be forgotten or ignored in the interests of moving on with life). And no doubt it is this view of melancholy that has attracted so many intellectuals to the work of Benjamin, who is often seen as the ultimate embodiment of such a stance. (Creaturely Life 89)
The ethical stance that Santner outlines here, one which he attributes to Walter Benjamin, might also be described as a “visionary” or “redemptive” view of melancholy. These adjectives capture the important theological dimension of Benjamin’s utopian thinking, and they foreground a set of paradoxes and dialectical inversions that do not attach to this way of thinking so much as define it. There is something odd, after all, in speaking of an “affective posture” as a strategy. And the visionary-sounding act of “hold[ing] open the possibility of alternative frameworks for what counts as reality” might obscure the fact that “holding open” a possibility is not the same as actually replacing one framework with another. The paradoxes do not stop there. Benjamin’s “visionary memory” takes what might seem the formula for a reactionary stance and transforms it into a means of revolutionary resistance (if not a strategy for an actual revolution). Although Santner does not mention him here by name, this view of melancholy as resistance to the “reigning ideological formation” relies on a theoretical opposition associated with Freud, whose primary interest in melancholy was neither ethical nor political. Mourning is a forward-looking, adaptive strategy; melancholy is a way of resisting ideologies of progress and change that demand conformity to the logic of what Benjamin called the “eternal recurrence of the new.”41 And if we think of Freud as endorsing the healthy strategy of mourning loss in the interest of maintaining fidelity to a “reality principle,” then we might say that Santner frames Benjamin’s concept of melancholy in Freudian terms so as to oppose Benjamin to Freud.

Benjamin’s model of resistance, as it is laid out here, has an understandable appeal. We can easily imagine, moreover, why this way of thinking about melancholy would come to seem an especially attractive option at those melancholy moments in history when the options are few and hopes for active revolution seem dim. One such moment would have been the period in 1939-40 between the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact and the invasion of France – the dark months when Benjamin wrote his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” with its famous reading of Paul Klee’s painting Angelus Novus as the iconic “angel of history” blown along by the storm of progress and bearing witness to the unfolding catastrophe.42 There are many other such moments in history, of course, when the loss of hope in

41 The phrase appears in the Arcades project, Konvolut D: “[Boredom, Eternal Return]”.
42 Here is the well-known passage from thesis IX:

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is
effecting revolutionary change serves to intensify a sense of history as catastrophe and produces an intense fascination with the singularity and alterity of objects as seen through their loss, and moments when these modes of attention also seem to offer new and much-needed ways of thinking about revolutionary change and the strategic value of adopting a stance. Much of the recent theoretical interest in Benjamin that Santner notes above may, in fact, reflect a longing for new models of ethical and political resistance that marks our own period.

There is a quite different assessment of melancholy that has also emerged from the twentieth century, a view that Santner contrasts with Benjamin’s, according to which melancholy is essentially a “mode of defense, a conflation of loss and absence, for which the basis is not an originating loss but the withdrawal of libido itself. It is an attempt to make an unattainable object appear as if it were a loss by means of a simulation … and one persuasive means of simulation is through art” (89-90). This is what we might call the “critical,” or perhaps “diagnostic” view of melancholy. It represents a sharp critique of the first stance, and it brings into view some quite different paradoxes. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben, for example, observes that melancholy “offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object” (20). Freud himself, in theoretical attempt to distinguish melancholia from mourning, was puzzled by this phenomenon of “premature” mourning. For Freud the scientist, this was an unresolved problem calling for further research and a newly revised theory that would account for, among other things, the problematic yet paradigmatic case of Shakespeare’s melancholy Dane. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud even held open the possibility that Hamlet’s view of the world as “an unweeded garden that grows to seed” – a belief unsupported by the available evidence, and a stance hard to account for as a response to a particular loss – might in fact, for all we know, be a correct view of the world. Science cannot rule out any possibility prematurely; the only thing open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Illuminations, 257-58)
of which the scientist can be sure, as Freud was well aware, is that all our theories are destined to fall to ru

Although Santner does not name any one person as the embodiment of this second view, the figure who perhaps best represents the critical-diagnostic approach is not Freud but Jacques Lacan and his later version of Freudian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the question is not whether Hamlet's view of world is a “correct” one. The real question is how the positing of such a view constitutes a world, and how this coherent image of the world at the same time rewards us with a coherent image of the self in relation to that world – a Hamlet-type of outsider, for example, with a lucid vision of things as they really are. What Hamlet gains from his strategy of conflating loss and lack, in other words, is that he gets to become Hamlet. This attractive model of selfhood gained some cultural currency in Shakespeare's time, as an example of what was popularly known as the “Elizabethan Malady.” Melancholy is defined by the strategy of constructing a rationale (and a world) that would sustain such images for the self.

For Lacan, melancholy is not a maladaptive response to loss; it is the ultimate adaptive strategy, a self-deluding strategy of identifying with culturally produced images for the self. Melancholy falls entirely within the realm of what Lacan designates as the “Imaginary,” in sharp contrast to the Real and the Symbolic. Lacan, moreover, theorizes this imaginary projection of lack (and its conflation with loss) as a necessary and unavoidable move. The problem comes when the Imaginary realm is confused with the Real, when a constitutive lack is posited as a real loss. The melancholic’s vision of the world in terms of what is lacking is a textbook example of the object–petit-a, or the object-cause of our desire, which not only provides the requisite and self-defining object of our desire, but also defines our world for us and makes possible any perception of it as a coherent whole. And in place of Freud’s Hamlet and Benjamin’s iconic and visionary image of Klee’s Angelus Novus, we have Lacan’s analysis of Hans Holbein’s painting The Ambassadors and its encoded “death’s head” image, illustrating how our perception of the world is built around the optical illusion of a lack projected onto that world. Lacan appeals to art for its illustrations and examples just as Freud does. But Lacan’s rather bleak view of art as the chief means of “simulating

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43 For a recent expression of this highly critical view from a Lacanian perspective, see Slavoj Žižek (2000).
44 See Lawrence Babb’s Elizabethan Malady for an account of this period.
loss” seems to conflate imaginative vision with imaginary self-delusion, and it leaves little room for experimental art as a means of reconfiguring our relation to the real world.

These are what Santner calls the two “competing” claims that govern two different ways of theorizing melancholy. Different as these concepts of melancholy are from each other, they nevertheless seem to be guided by some shared interests. The visionary and the critical concepts of melancholy can both be formulated (as Santner does) in the binary terms established by Freud in his classic 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” Melancholy is a strategic response either to a real or to an imagined loss – which means that melancholy may be thought of as escapist and regressive, just as easily as we might equate mourning with a conformity to the status quo. This shared framework attests to the continuing importance of Freud’s theory and to the way it continues to shape the way we understand even the differences between competing claims. In all versions, including a third version represented by Freud, we see also a shared epistemic concern with access to the real. For Freud, melancholy is a maladaptive failure to conform to a reality principle; in Benjamin, there is fidelity to real loss as an awakening from the dream-time of reigning ideologies of progress; and finally, we have melancholy as a projective mode of defense that Lacan relegates to the realm of the unreal – the Imaginary, as distinguished from the Real or the Symbolic (the realm of language).

Santner juxtaposes these conceptual frames with the aim of steering a middle course to arrive at a new way of thinking about melancholy in ethical and political terms (and more specifically, for Santner, bio-political terms). My interests here are quite different. This is a study of modernism and melancholy, and I want to ask what it might mean to think of Benjamin as the embodiment of a distinctly modernist way of thinking about melancholy, of a conceptual transformation made in response to pressures and needs that can be fully understood only in the context of a specific period. Benjamin was not alone among his generation in pursuing such a transformation. Modernist artists and thinkers in the early decades of the century saw in melancholy not a mode of passive resistance; rather, they saw an untapped resource for artistic experiment and revolutionary activity (and they often made a point of conflating these projects). A purely theoretical approach tends to obscure these period-specific motivations. It also bypasses a central paradox that will be a central one for me, as it was a motivating ideal for Benjamin: the idea of an avant-garde melancholy, itself a revolutionary – or at least unusual –
development in the long history of thinking about melancholy. For modernist artists in the early twentieth century, and for thinkers like Benjamin who aligned themselves with the artistic avant-garde, the search for new ways of “being” melancholy meant finding ways out of what they identified as a pressing cultural crisis. And one of the problems to which modernists were responding was a specific manifestation of melancholy itself – an affective stance that Kierkegaard, in the preceding century, called “the ailment of the age.”

The contextual study I will attempt here is premised on the belief that modernist experiments in melancholy must be seen as constructive attempts to envision alternatives, and not simply efforts to diagnose (or evade) realities, and that these envisioned alternatives get their light, their purpose, from what modernist artists recognized as problems and pressures and limitations within their culture. Rather than steer a middle course, as Santner does, I will argue that part of what makes Benjamin distinctively modernist is that he embodies both the “visionary” and the “critical” concepts of melancholy. I want to keep both interests in view, because I think they reflect two important aspects of a distinctly modernist thinking about melancholy – a duality of interest that is captured by Jürgen Habermas in his description of Benjamin’s “redemptive criticism.” If we want to understand what is distinctly modernist about Benjamin’s concept of melancholy, then we need to bracket and set aside our own ethical and political notion of “resistance” so that we can begin to account for what Benjamin and other modernists saw as their experimental and revolutionary aims.

Benjamin, in fact, engaged in a psychological and cultural critique of given forms of melancholy that is actually quite compatible with what Lacan elaborated several decades later. Benjamin, however, is motivated by a sense of historical precedent and historical crisis that we do not find in Lacan, but which almost defines early twentieth-century modernism. Benjamin sees melancholy as a historically contingent stance, and he sees in the history of the concept a series of attempted transformations and adaptations. The historical range of his critique is astonishing: from Aristotle to the Baroque Trauerspiel, from Baudelaire to the Surrealists and the once-popular 1920s movement known as Neue Sachlichkeit (“New

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45 Here I borrow from the language of Wittgenstein in section 109 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he famously writes of descriptive practices as a means of seeking alternatives to, or ways out of escaping from, the philosophical problems that are an impediment and a “bewitchment of our intelligence”: “And this [task of] description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems.”
Objectivity”). And the targets of Benjamin’s critique encompass not only ideologies of progress, but also affective postures of resigned passivity that imagine themselves as modes of “resistance.” In his 1931 polemic “Linke Melancolie” (“Leftist Melancholy”) for example, Benjamin attacked the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement as the contemporary embodiment of “tortured stupidity … the latest of two millenia of metamorphoses of melancholy” (*Selected Writings* vol. 2.2 426). The great appeal of the movement to its followers, Benjamin wrote, was that it functioned to “reconcile this type of person to himself.” Benjamin’s critique is characteristically modernist: Lacanian in its sharp diagnosis of cultural problems and self-deluding psychological strategies, and at the same time Nietzschean in the polemical clarity with which it identifies the problems it seeks to overcome. We could even cast Nietzsche’s own psychological critique of the Will to Truth largely in terms of Lacan’s concept of the Imaginary. What distinguishes modernists like Nietzsche and Benjamin from Lacan, however, is their search for radical alternatives to the psychological and cultural problems they diagnosed.

On one level, this move to contextualize seeks to acknowledge – and, hopefully, address – a rather obvious question. The foundational texts in question were both written in the early decades of the century, and only a few years apart: Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study in the early 1920s, and Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917. Should we think of this conceptual framework as a *modernist* inheritance? Is there some reason these concepts emerged at this particular moment in history? And one of the less obvious questions I want to address is why Freud’s concept of melancholy is so difficult to connect with the revolutionary interests of the contemporary avant garde, in contrast with (say) the concept of the Uncanny. Writing to Breton in 1930, Freud confessed with some irritation that he had no understanding of Surrealism and its aims.46 Indeed, the revolutionary concept of melancholy, and the notion of an “avant-garde melancholy,” could not have been farther from Freud’s interests. By contrast, the development of Benjamin’s concept of melancholy is virtually inseparable from his discovery of Surrealism in the 1920s. I want to begin, then, with Surrealism as an important context for understanding how Benjamin’s thinking about melancholy (and even his personal melancholy temperament) intersected with an avant-garde movement most often associated with Louis Aragon and André Breton.

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46 The correspondence between Freud and Breton is reprinted as an appendix to the English edition of *The Communicating Vessels* translated by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey Harris.
1. **Benjamin, Surrealism, and Melancholy Made Cheerful**

   “Surrealism’s chief contribution to sensibility,” Susan Sontag observed in her essay-profile of Walter Benjamin, “was to make melancholy cheerful” (124). What sort achievement is this exactly — to make melancholy cheerful? Sontag makes no specific mention of a Surrealist text, but her ready-made aphorism might shed some light on a brief but important passage in one of the movement’s founding documents: Louis Aragon’s 1926 experimental novel *Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant)*.

   The scene in question, which reads like a manifesto in the form of a miniature allegory, contains a striking phenomenological account of melancholy presented from the point of view of Aragon’s first-person narrator. The brief drama unfolds against the backdrop of the soon-to-be-demolished Paris Arcades and the often shady businesses that remain in operation. The narrator, a Parisian *flaneur* who has been wandering through these modern-day urban ruins, and who (at this point) is inebriated after waiting in a bar for a friend who never shows up, exits the arranged meeting place and descends a flight of steps that lead from the artificially enclosed environment of the arcades to the mid-day bustle of the street outside. He pauses on the steps, where he feels himself suspended between “two kinds of daylight”: the blooming, buzzing world before him and the gas-lit, grotto-like space from which he emerges as if from a dream. “For a moment,” Aragon’s narrator observes,

   the scales dip towards the weird gulf of appearances. Strange lure of these arbitrary arrangements: here is someone crossing a street, and the space around him is solid, and here is a piano on the pavement, and motorcars squatting under their drivers. (47)

   The shock of transition thus has a defamiliarizing effect. All things swim and glitter.47 The narrator is made responsive to, is confronted by, a phantasmagorical world of objects and images that seem to arrange themselves arbitrarily. There are no sewing machines,48 but we do come across umbrellas and walking sticks on display in a shop window that suddenly begin swim and sway as if they were aquatic

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47 This line alludes to Emerson’s essay “Experience,” which will be the subject of Chapter 4.
48 The paradigmatic Surrealist juxtaposition comes from Lautréamont, who (long before the term “Surrealist” was coined) yoked together by violence two heterogeneous ideas in his paradigmatic simile: “beautiful as the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.”
plants deep underwater, made visible by the phosphorescence of a “submarine light” whose source is unknown. The entire Passage de l’Opéra becomes an underwater playground in which the subject sways in tandem with the objects in view. The subject’s vantage point, from which all objects are illuminated and brought into view, becomes as diffuse as the play of sub-aquatic light and as indeterminate as its source. The passage above presents what we would now recognize as a familiar – even typical – Surrealist recontra, or encounter. But the narrator’s responsiveness is not the result of a willing and cheerful surrender to a world of images set free; it is linked with a paralysis verging on what we might also now recognize (and diagnose) as a dissociative episode. The scales can – and do – tip the other way, and the fantastic but vaguely threatening chaos of this world soon plunges the narrator into a state of despair:

From this sentimental crossroads, as I regard alternately this land of disorder and the great arcade illuminated by my instincts, at one or another of these trompe-l’oeil, I perceive not even the tiniest moment of hope … I feel the ground tremble, and I find myself suddenly like a sailor on board of a ruined chateau. Everything signifies devastation. Under my contemplative gaze, everything falls into ruin. (48)

If we choose to read this miniature allegory as a manifesto, then it is not difficult to see how melancholy, thus conceived, might have had interest for Surrealism. This scene demonstrates that infinite sensitivity – what André Breton called (in the first Surrealist Manifesto) “the spark of the image, to which we are infinitely sensitive” – may have some connection with the loss of hope. Melancholy contemplation, with its alienating effect, is thus one possible route to the Uncanny, one possible mode of defamiliarization (along with dream states and narcotic drugs) explored by Surrealists as a means of short-circuiting habitual and rational thought and inducing a kind of responsiveness. The self, as one Surrealist put it, is the ultimate drug. Seeing everything in ruins (or rather, as ruins) allows the subject to experience the world as an array of liberated images. Everything “falls to ruin” under the narrator’s contemplative gaze, and contemplation is itself the mechanism that makes possible this alienated vision. The subject’s awareness of a “gulf” between the object and its meaning, between the world of appearance and the world, has the effect of further widening the gulf. But it has also the paradoxical effect of liberating
objects and images from the realm of meaning altogether. It is the subject’s awareness of the gap between surface and meaning that simultaneously liberates and paralyzes.

What happens next to Aragon’s narrator, in the second half of the passage, is an even more direct invitation to read the entire episode as a manifesto dealing specifically with the defamiliarizing effects of melancholy (which is never mentioned by name in this passage). At the moment when the scales have tipped fully the other way for the narrator, sending the narrator into a spiral of alienated despair, he looks down and sees another figure sitting beside him on the steps. It is his alter-ego, a personification of the “sense of uselessness”:

The sense of uselessness is squatting beside me on the first step. He is dressed like me, but with an added touch of nobility. He does not carry a handkerchief. The infinite is reflected in his face, and he holds extended between his hands a blue accordion which he never plays, and upon which one can read: PESSIMISM. (48)

The narrator then suddenly morphs into this projected figure, picks up the unplayed blue accordion, and begins to play it on the edge of the water. (The scenery has also, apparently, undergone a literal “sea-change”: we are now on the waterfront or on a boat dock – or perhaps on the deck of a “ruined chateau” out at sea.) With every squeeze of the bellows, keeping time with the crashing and receding of the waves, the word “pessimism” literally falls apart into the ruins its constituent letters. The word finally dissolves letter by letter as the accordion, thrown into the water, sinks below the surface:

PSSMSM
As I stretch them again, the I’s reappear:
PSSIMISM
followed by the E:
PESSIMISM
And the whole thing starts wailing from left to right […]
The wave reaches this shore with a barbaric explosion. And starts to recede again.
The spell has been broken, the paralysis of despair overcome. There is no meaning to interpret, nothing more to reconstruct, no fragments upon which to brood; there are only arbitrary signs and concatenations of signs to dissolve and re-arrange in new and surprising juxtapositions. The narrator, it seems, has learned to stop worrying over meaning and correspondences between mind and world and learned to love the spectacle of the free play among meaningless signs. He learns to live among surfaces and immerse himself in the spectacle without being haunted by any illusion of depth. We return, finally, to the top of the steps leading out to the street, to the place where the narrator (meanwhile) remains standing:

Standing on one leg, the other foot cupped in his hand, a bit theatrical, a bit common, clay pipe, cap tilted over one eye, and singing I do believe: *Ah, if only you knew the details of the life of Burgundy snails...* at the top of the steps, in the dust and the fag ends, why if it isn’t that charming boy: the Sense of the useless. (49)

And so this bizarre scene comes to an abrupt end, with an asterisk winking at us to signify a shift to a new section and a new episode, the text cheerfully aware of its own playful and experimental discontinuities in tone and form. But no amount of irony can quite dispel our urge to interpret the “moral” of the play that has been staged for us. And with interpretation comes skepticism and doubt. Questions come to the surface. Is this a demonstration of the uncanny power of objects and images, or merely the power of irony to distract and simply put a spin on things? Is Aragon’s narrator (and it is, all weirdness aside, the voice of a narrator) simply a twentieth-century spin on Baudelaire’s *flaneur*, liberated from the mystical notion that correspondences exist between the mind and the cryptic “forests of symbols” through which the subject wanders and which emit “sometimes confused words”?49 By the end of Aragon’s scene, the

49 Here is the opening of Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances”:

*La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers*
“sense of uselessness” is subtly transformed into the more subjectively colored feeling of futility – the “sense of the useless,” which suggests a consciousness of, or a taste for. But one’s taste for nonsense and for the objectively random and arbitrary, however cheerful, remain as tenuously private and subject-centered as one’s sense of futility. The narrator will sober up by morning, the charm will wear off. The world illuminated by his instincts will likely be replaced by the leaden sense of the world produced by an all-too-predictable hangover. In its effort to engineer a pure receptivity, Surrealism must somehow make use of the melancholic’s acute sense of a gulf between the object-world “outside” and “the world illuminated by [his] instincts,” but it must do so without this despair over the chaos and futility of images set free leading the subject to recoil (instinctively) and seek refuge in a consoling form of idealism (thereby abandoning the object). The challenge of “making use” of melancholy is thus analogous to the problem of how to tap into the dissociative power of dream while, at the same time, waking oneself from the dream state into a Surreality that overcomes and erases the boundary between object and subject, reality and dream. It is a delicate balancing act, to say the least.

Sontag’s quip about Surrealism and melancholy, then, raises a more general question about the revolutionary gesture of reconceptualizing melancholy so as to make it new. We might wonder, for example, if there is anything special about this interest in the defamiliarizing power of melancholy, as opposed to Surrealists’ well-known interest in semi-conscious states of mind, hallucinatory drugs, schizophrenia and various other means of bypassing the subjective ego to tap into the revolutionary potential of the unwilled and arbitrary. Why, for example, would Surrealists feel a need to transform melancholy and make it into something new? Why not simply regard melancholy as one other mode of apprehending the world whose latent subversive potential lies ready and waiting to be exploited? This further complicates our understanding of Surrealists’ revolutionizing of the concept of melancholy. There is an overcoming of melancholy, and at the same time a transformation. There is something to be transformed as well as overcome. For Aragon, moreover, the image has the power not only to wake the

*Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.*

(Nature is a temple where living pillars
Let escape sometimes confused words;
Man traverses it through forests of symbols
That observe him with familiar glances.)
subject from the commodified dream-world of capitalist modernity; the spark produced by these unwilled juxtapositions also has the capacity of “annihilating the entire Universe,” as we read in a rhapsodic passage not long after the narrated scene in the Paris Arcades (66). It is the objects and images that have explosive and revolutionary potential, not the subject’s imaginative visions or rational utopian plans.\textsuperscript{50} Just how it is that an image can “annihilate the universe” is a question about Surrealist revolutionary praxis – or, at least that \textit{would} have been the chief concern in the mid 1920s, when the movement still harbored unqualified hopes of putting its experiments in the uncanny to direct political use. It is, at the very least, counter-intuitive to identify revolutionary potential in melancholy – a state traditionally associated with passive inwardness, political resignation, and withdrawal from the world. The effect of everything falling to ruin is the experience of a myth being exploded from the dialectical instability of the subject-object relationship (the dream-world of capitalism). It is an intriguing political revolutionary vision, what one critic (Margaret Cohen) has given the name “Gothic Marxism.”

So much for the political revolution. But just how are we supposed to read this scene as an allegory of melancholy made cheerful? This is a more fundamental question, one that requires paying close attention not only to political praxis and utopian visions of the future, but also to the Surrealists’ keen sense of historical precedent and their sense of what existing models of melancholy needed to be revolutionized and transformed. We can begin by taking stock of some of the allusions and possible allusions. The most obvious allusion is to one of the most iconic (and thoroughly interpreted) images in the history of the discourse surrounding melancholy: Albrecht Dürer’s etching \textit{Melancolia I} with its figure of “winged melancholy” seated and lost in contemplation. The blue accordion that sits unplayed has its counterpart in Dürer’s etching in the array of unused implements and other randomly scattered objects that surround the seated figure. By Dürer’s time, each of these objects – the stone, the compass, the globe, the dog – had acquired its own allegorical and iconic significance. Dürer’s image, in fact, can be read as a summation of what was already a long history of thinking about melancholy. At the very least, the unambiguous allusion to Dürer confirms that Aragon’s mini-allegory deals with the age-old concept of

\textsuperscript{50} The key text, which marks a turning point in Surrealist concept of art “in the service of the revolution,” is André Breton’s 1932 book \textit{The Communicating Vessels} (predating by several years Leon Trotsky’s defense of the autonomy of imaginative literature in response to Communist Party aesthetics). Breton’s defense of the imagination, however, is made more complicated by the fact that the Surrealist concept of the imagination remained premised on an anti-art aesthetic “exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (as Breton put it in the first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924).
melancholy, and not with some generic notion of pessimism or with the nineteenth-century discourse on nihilism. Reading it simply as a parody of a given model of melancholy does not tell us much about the model of thinking about melancholy that Surrealism is attempting to transform. The revolutionary gesture, in other words, must be located in the juxtaposition and not in the parody.

This fleeting allusion to Dürer, however, may have a special place in the cultural context from which Surrealism emerged. By the early twentieth century, Dürer’s image had become virtually inseparable from a dominant interpretation that had gained currency outside the narrow discipline of art history. Dürer’s representation of melancholia was recognizably modern, a portrait of melancholia that stood out from the medieval allegorical Temperamentsbild (a generic representation of a temperament). It represented a revolution in the visual arts, as well as a triumphant awakening in the way people related to themselves and to the world. In the nineteenth century, the century of Jacob Burckhardt and John Ruskin, Melancolia I came to signify a revolution in the concept of melancholy that coincided with the birth of modernity. Dürer helped to inspire a post-enlightenment historicism, which – in turn – gave birth to Dürer as the prototype of the heroic genius of the Renaissance whose expressive art was read as a personal triumph over the conventional iconography of medieval pre-history. Perhaps the most influential reading of Dürer along these lines, a summing up and crystallization of this interpretive tendency, comes from art historian Erwin Panofsky’s early book-length study Saturn and Melancholy, which was published in German in 1922 (only a few years prior to the publication of Paysan de Paris). For Panofsky, Dürer’s etching allegorizes the creative triumph over allegory itself. Panofsky claimed that “Dürer was the first artist north of the Alps [i.e., the first to spread the ideas of Marsilio Ficino and the modern aesthetic of Italian Renaissance] to raise the portrayal of melancholy to the dignity of a symbol, in which there appears a powerfully compelling concordance between the abstract notion and the concrete image” (306). Contrasting the expressiveness of Dürer’s image with earlier allegorical representations of melancholia whose meaning required an appeal to the exegetical apparatus of “legends,” Panofsky declared that “here, and here alone, the legend (which at this stage of development begins to be superfluous) says to us neither ‘this is meant to represent the black bile,’ nor ‘this is a typical example of the melancholy temperament;’ but ‘melancholy is like this’” (304).
This historical allusion, referring to an interpretation of the image as much as to the image itself, further complicates our reading of Aragon’s already complicated and perhaps wholly parodic passage. As Dürer’s image and Ficino’s revival of Aristotle demonstrate, the history of melancholy can be read as a series of attempts to re-interpret the concept within a model designed to exploit what was seen as its visionary or revolutionary potential. In order to understand Surrealism’s revolutionary transformation of melancholy (conceived more broadly than its use for political revolution), we need to understand that it was a transformation of a concept of melancholy that Panofsky characterizes as already an historical revolution. But here we run the risk of anachronism ourselves, of conflating Burckhardt’s narrative of heroic individualism with Ficino’s – in which case Panofsky’s interpretation merely attests to the dominance of this way of reading, and nothing more. There is no evidence, after all, that Aragon had read Panofsky’s book or that he intended for us to dwell at length upon a facetious and fleeting allusion. So how seriously should we take these few pages in *Paysan de Paris*? And how important is the context of Panofsky’s *reading* of Dürer’s image?

Aragon’s passage, if read as a manifesto, is the closest thing we have to a Surrealist manifesto on melancholy. But it is Walter Benjamin, an attentive reader of both Panofsky and Aragon in the 1920s, who gives us perhaps the best reason to pause over Aragon’s allusion. Benjamin, as we shall see, developed what is by far the most important theory of melancholy among modernists, and he recognized very early on the connection between the revolutionary aims of Surrealism and the aim of transforming the concept of melancholy. Sontag’s comment on Surrealism, in fact, appears in her essay on Benjamin, at a time when he was just becoming known in the English-speaking world. Benjamin had just finished his study of the Baroque Trauerspiel, which included his response to Panofsky’s recently published interpretation of Dürer.\(^5\) (He came across *Saturn and Melancholia* while completing his study). The timing was perfect, almost uncanny. Benjamin explicitly took issue with the transfer of an enlightenment progress narrative into the arts, the overcoming of superstition, the triumph of light over darkness and fear, of Panofsky and the “powerfully compelling concordance between the abstract notion and the concrete image” which in typical historicist fashion projects a progress narrative onto Dürer that privileges

\(^5\) For fuller accounts of Benjamin’s relation to the iconographic methodology of the Warburg Institute, and particularly the methodological kinship between Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Benjamin’s *Arcades* project, see Beatrice Hanssen (1999); Matthew Rampley (2000); and Bock (2000).
the organic unity of Romantic symbol over allegory.52 In this Enlightenment narrative, the symbol
triumphs over allegory, just as instrumental reason triumphs over fear of the unknown. And we see the
historical emergence of Ficino’s heroic melancholy as it manifests itself in the ideal of the artist-hero: the
solitary creative genius whose works of art testify to the realization of his personal vision, to his effort to
overcome his despair and create meaning out of the raw materials of a fallen world. The triumph of the
symbol over allegory, like the sense of the tragic that overshadows and historically displaces Trauer,53 is
a central theme throughout Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study. And as one graphic example of the way
progress narratives (like Panofsky’s) marginalize and erase from memory, Benjamin draws special
attention to the stone motif in Dürer’s image – the one motif whose significance Panofsky fails to consider
in his otherwise thorough analysis of melancholy iconography. Benjamin’s account of the Baroque
Trauerspiel thus represents an important counter-narrative to Panofsky’s historicist account. For
Benjamin, the Baroque Trauerspiel was diametrically opposed early modern response to (and at the
same time a historically specific manifestation of) the disenchantment of modernity. Benjamin interpreted
the Trauerspiel as a last-ditch embrace of an allegorical vision of the world, a mute and powerless protest
against the forces of modernity by writers who left a record of their melancholy fixations, and their historic
failure, at a moment when the Enlightenment was closing in on their darkness.
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Looking back from a distance of nearly fifteen years, Benjamin described his reading of Paysan
de Paris as a transformative event in his life and gave it credit as the source and inspiration for what
would become his Arcades project. Benjamin also recalled his first experience of reading Paysan de
Paris, of nights in bed when he could not read more than two or three pages “before my heart started to

52 Benjamin opens his chapter “Allegory and Trauerspiel” with a sweeping claim: “For a hundred years the
philosophy of art has been subject to the tyranny of a usurper who came to power in the chaos which
followed in the wake of romanticism.” Benjamin reviews a wide range of theoretical sources for the
romantic symbol/allegory distinction, all of them prefiguring Baudelaire’s correspondances. In the symbol,
Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote, the particular represents “the universal, not as a dream or shadow, but
as a living and momentary revelation of the inscrutable [lebendig-augenblickliche Offenbarung des
Unerforschlichen].” Coleridge, who owed much to German romanticism, famously distinguished between
the mere artifice of allegory and the symbol, which “partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible.”
53 For Benjamin’s comments on the historical neglect of Trauer (mournfulness) as opposed to the tragic –
Benjamin’s own dissociation of sensibility narrative, and his answer to Nietzsche’s focus on tragic
intensity – see Origin, 118f.
beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside” (Adorno-Benjamin Correspondence 88). Apart from the episode alluding to Dürer, it was passages like the following that probably caught Benjamin’s attention in the mid 1920s:

The vice named Surrealism is the immoderate and impassioned use of the stupefacent [stupéfiant] image, or rather the uncontrolled provocation of the image for its sake and for the element of unpredictable perturbation and of metamorphosis which it introduces into the domain of representation: for each image on each occasion forces you to revise the entire Universe. And for each man there awaits discovery a particular image capable of annihilating the entire Universe. (Aragon 66)

Benjamin would also express reservations about the “nebulous philosophemes” he saw in Aragon (some evidence of which may be found above), and he took early notice of “alarming deficiencies” in the movement’s philosophical premises. But what Benjamin responded to in exuberant passages like the one above was not a theoretical articulation of melancholy so much as the idea of a revolutionary melancholy.

This revolutionary potential of seeing everything in ruins was recognized in Benjamin’s perceptive early assessment of the movement in his 1928 essay, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” written only two years after the appearance of Paris Peasant and four years after the first Surrealist manifesto:

[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”, in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept of it than these

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54 The original German subtitle reads: “Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz,” and “Die letzte” – most often translated as “The Last” – should be understood in the sense of “the most recent” or “latest.”
authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution — not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors/enslaved and enslaving objects — can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism. Leaving aside Aragon’s Passage de l’Opéra, Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. (210)

While this passage celebrates what was unique in Surrealism and what was revolutionary about its concept of the revolutionary, we also begin to see evidence of Benjamin’s reservations about what was (and remains) the standard version of Surrealism. Aragon and Breton may have been the first to recognize how the apprehension of “enslaved and enslaving objects,” the contemplative gaze under which everything falls to ruin and spectacle of “destitution,” can be transformed into a “revolutionary nihilism.” But the experimental narratives of Surrealism, staging what Breton called “lyric behavior,” give us a “revolutionary experience” that should not (Benjamin suggests) be equated with “action” in the literal sense. Those who thought of themselves as committed to political revolution in the 1920s were interested in action in the literal sense, in collective behavior that literally broke windows and overturned systems. Such readers might have delighted at Benjamin’s scathing attack on ineffectual bourgeois “leftist melancholy,” and there was a side of Benjamin that could sound the stridently polemical tone his friend Bertolt Brecht. Apart from a select few readers, though, the idea that melancholy itself could have some revolutionary potential would have been aseemed to the average Communist party member just as incomprehensible as the aims of Surrealism seemed to Freud. If the mainstream Communist party had such little patience with Breton’s talk of “objective chance” and the “marvelous,” then is hard to imagine anything like a charitable response to Benjamin’s esotericism. And so we must, in some sense, approach Benjamin’s revolutionary and utopian version of Surrealism as a movement that consisted of a single member, a solitary radical who was more likely to be found seated at a table in the Bibliothèque National than in an open-air Paris café.
Benjamin recognized in Surrealism a twentieth-century attempt to transform the ideal of a “religious illumination” into the secular and materialist practice of “profane illumination” – Benjamin’s name for the Surrealist rencontre (encounter) between a subject and the “uncontrolled provocation of the image.” The profane illumination, as conceived by Benjamin and the Surrealists, was the avant-garde antithesis of the modernist epiphany: neither a religious intimation of what lies beyond, nor a consubstantive meeting half-way between the imagination and the world. The encounter with the “stupefacient” image required a stupefied subject whose rational and imaginative faculties had been suppressed or short-circuited. “Dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth,” Benjamin wrote in his 1928 essay (208). But dream was not the only means of inducing in the subject a passive responsiveness to the uncanny alterity of the object and to the provocative power of the image.

In his chance encounter with Surrealism, we see a dramatic intersection of Benjamin’s critical and visionary interests in melancholy. There are other passages in Paysan de Paris that Benjamin may have read with the shock of recognition. The passage quoted above, for example, appears not long after a curious allusion to Albrecht Dürer’s iconic early Renaissance image of winged melancholy, in a brief episode that reads like a manifesto in the form of an allegory of overcoming. When Benjamin first read Aragon in 1925, he had only recently finished his extended study of the historical genre of the German Baroque Trauerspiel, or “mourning-play,” a genre characterized by its morbid fixation on the fragment and its allegorical fascination with the arbitrary and severed relationship between sign and object. The Trauerspiel was in some respects a stylistic anticipation of Expressionism, but Benjamin was most interested in its allegorical vision as offering one model of what a “profane illumination” might look like. Allegory, Benjamin noted, is a characteristically melancholy mode of expression. The Trauerspiel represented an alternative to a Renaissance model of religious illumination and to a religious concept of melancholy, both of which found their clearest articulation in the immensely influential sixteenth-century

\[ \text{Here is the text of the passage:} \]

When, as is the case in the Trauerspiel, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script. The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the Trauerspiel, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. This explains the baroque cult of the ruin. (Origin 177-78)
treatise by Marsilio Ficino titled *De Vita Triplici* (a passage which Erwin Panofsky singles out in his interpretation of Dürer's etching):

As long as we are representatives of God on Earth, we are continually troubled by nostalgia for the celestial fatherland, even if we are unaware of it, and in this exile no earthly pleasure can comfort the human mind, since it is eager for better things. (qtd. in Kristeller 211)

Ficino’s concept of “heroic melancholy” was itself an important metamorphosis in the concept of melancholy. It was an attempt to re-conceive what medieval theologians called “accedia,” the ambiguously sinful strategy of brooding upon the fallennes of the world so as to intensify one’s imaginative “eagerness for better things” (and a desire for closeness to God made more intense by contemplation of His absence). Ficino effected this transformation by combining Christian neo-Platonism with Aristotle’s “great man” theory of melancholy that explained the melancholic’s sense of isolation as the price one pays for seeing farther than others. The concept of heroic melancholy, emerging in the Renaissance from the marriage of secular and Christian thought, was rapidly re-translated into a secular idealism that would become the basis of the Renaissance concept of the artistic genius, of the Romantic concept of the symbol, and the tendency of philosophical idealism in its various manifestations to give priority to the power of the creative imagination and privilege the subject over the object.  

Benjamin saw in the Baroque Trauerspiel an early and fleeting attempt to reverse this historical tendency, one that would privilege the object instead. The Trauerspiel took the otherworldly gaze of Ficino’s Neoplatonic idealism, its longing premised on the falleness of nature, and re-directed the intensity of that gaze upon the forlorn fragments and arbitrary images of the fallen world itself. “Trauerspiel” is often translated in English as “mourning play”; but the Trauerspielen are nihilistic and obsessively brooding, not elegiac in an atmospheric sense or ritualistic in the sense of enacting the

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56 Or what Adorno – developing Benjamin’s thought with specific reference to the idealism that manifests itself in the subsumptive and imperialist logic of instrumental reason – would later call “identarian” or “identity-thinking”: “Dialectics seek to say what something is, while ‘identarian’ thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself” (*Negative Dialectics* 149).
healthy process of mourning. Benjamin defined *Trauer* as a sensibility that alters one’s vision of the world:

*Trauer* is the sensibility in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, in order to take a puzzling [rätselhafte] pleasure in its sight ... *Trauer*, as it emerges as the pendant to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of the world which emerges under the gaze of the melancholic. ... If, for *Trauerspiel*, the representation of these laws are to be found, partly developed, partly undeveloped, in the heart of *Trauer*, the representation of these laws has nothing to do with the state of feelings of the poet or the audience, but rather with a feeling which is released from an empirical subject and bound to the fullness of an object. (qtd. in Pensky *Melancholy Dialectics* 90)

*Trauer*, then, becomes a property of objects that is “released” under the melancholic’s gaze, a non-subjective feeling that expresses and makes visible what the Japanese have aptly termed the “sadness of things” (*mono no aware*). This is one of many passages in the *Trauerspiel* study that convey, with barely concealed enthusiasm, the discovery of a mode of expression (allegory) that could also function as *experimental method*. In Surrealism, Benjamin discovered a further development of what had been only “partly developed” in the Trauerspiel.

The challenge for Surrealism, as Benjamin conceived it, was to retain a brooding fascination with fragments without the brooding melancholy *subject*, to effect the necessary “release” from the subject that would allow the object and the image to flash forth. It was a delicate and complex project, and Benjamin did not always find Breton and Aragon up to the task. *Paysan de Paris* contained patches of vague philosophizing, but it was also marred by passages that Benjamin felt were too impressionistic and hinted at a conflict between Benjamin’s materialist redemptive criticism and the ideal of “lyric behavior” that would continue to guide the Surrealism of Aragon and Breton. Benjamin’s aims would diverge from the movement in other ways. There were many techniques for “loosening individuality like a bad tooth,” and Surrealists had already explored some of them by 1925 – hashish, dream, automatic writing, impersonal
desire. Benjamin, however, had limited interest in narcotics, and no interest at all in automatic writing. “The true creative overcoming of religious illumination,” he wrote in his 1928 essay on Surrealism, “certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (One-Way Street 157). It was Benjamin who would develop an experimental version of Surrealism in which melancholy played a central role in facilitating the encounter with the object. The most powerful drug of all, Benjamin claimed, was the self (ibid).

Benjamin mostly kept his distance from Breton and the evolving Surrealist orthodoxy throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and so it is easy to read his relationship to the movement as illuminating but merely incidental to the development of his thought. Much of the best critical work on Benjamin and his relation to Surrealism has been done by philosophers, and not by literary critics who want to contextualize Benjamin as a modernist. But any philosophical study that tries to redeem Benjamin’s ideas through paraphrase, as forming a coherent or at least a semi-coherent philosophy, will tend to run aground when it comes to defining (with even a modicum of clarity) what Benjamin called the “dialectical image,” the conceptual lynchpin in his methodological formulation of the Surrealist recontre. Benjamin had criticized Aragon for his “nebulous philosophemes.” But the ideas that Benjamin came up with as the theoretical basis for his project do not fare much better from a philosophical point of view. In the end, it is probably more accurate to speak of Benjamin’s peculiar version of Surrealism and his Surrealist concept of melancholy, rather than invoke his connection with Surrealism as a way of illuminating a theory that might not, in fact, stand up as a theory. The Arcades project is the product of what I will call Benjamin’s “melancholy as method”; in spite of its belated and ambiguous canonical status within the movement, it is also in many ways the ultimate Surrealist text.

57 Benjamin did, however, attend the meetings of the short-lived and informal group known as the “Collège de Sociologie” in Paris between 1937 and 1939, where he likely engaged in discussions with former Surrealists and regular attendees, including George Bataille, Michel Leiris, Jean Paulhan, and Roger Callois. The group invited Benjamin to give a series of talks, but nothing came of it. For a history of the group and a collection of texts, see Denis Hollier.
58 See, for example, Max Pensky’s Melancholy Dialectics and Margaret Cohen’s Profane Illumination.
59 Rolf Tiedemann, for example, notes that the concept “never achieved any terminological consistency” in Benjamin’s work. Many other Benjamin critics (Susan Buck-Morss among them) have come to a similar conclusion. The lack of philosophical rigor was recognized early on by Theodor Adorno, one of Benjamin’s most perceptive and sympathetic critics. Later in this chapter, I will take a closer look at Adorno’s critical response to Benjamin and to Surrealism.
Benjamin described his Surrealism essay as a pendant to his essay on Proust (written three years later, in 1931). The juxtaposition of Benjamin’s concept of melancholy, his “hope in the past,” and Proust’s concept of *memoire involontaire* is an interesting one.⁶⁰ Proust, as Peter Szondi observes, “listens attentively for the echo of the past; Benjamin listens for the first notes of a future” (19). Benjamin’s ideal of redemption as “the recognizability of now” is not the same as Proust’s recovery of lost time (*Le Temps retrouvé* suggests an investigative, empirical project of recovery). Proust celebrates the redemptive power of art and the auditory (and olfactory) power of a melancholy subjectivity that makes associations and creates meaning only after one’s experiences have receded into the past and the past itself is dead (this is Proust’s method of “mortification”). It is a fascinating juxtaposition about which more can be said. I can only touch upon it here, with the purpose of highlighting Benjamin’s different attitude toward the function of art. Like Nietzsche, Benjamin wanted to transform the concept of art itself; it was the *anti-art* aesthetic of the avant garde that fascinated him. Avant-garde techniques would replace Proust’s experimental aestheticism (and his melancholy subjectivity) with an exoteric, objective method. As I hope to show, what Benjamin does with his concept melancholy is an answer not only to Proust, but to Nietzschean aestheticism as well.

2. **Nietzsche and the Ailment of the Age**

The scene from *Paysan de Paris* contains another quiet allusion, more obscure than the reference of Dürer’s image but no less interesting. Max Pensky, one of the few critics who have paid close attention to the passage, identifies an allusion to Nietzsche in the figure of the “riddling, mocking dwarf who squats upon Zarathustra’s shoulders as he struggles up his mountain path” (185). This indicates, for Pensky, a contrasting model of overcoming melancholy that he distinguishes from the Surrealism of Benjamin and Aragon. “The dominion of melancholy,” Pensky writes “is broken not by a Nietzschean act of assertion of will so much as [in Aragon’s Surrealism] a magical transmutation of melancholia itself” (186). Although he oversimplifies Nietzsche somewhat, as I will try show in a later chapter, Pensky is right to suggest that the Nietzsche-inspired active nihilism of the early avant-garde

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⁶⁰ See also Svetlana Boym’s reflections on nostalgia as a mode, and her distinction between “reflective nostalgia” (Proust, for example) and what she calls Benjamin’s “restorative nostalgia.” The former involves taking pleasure in the distance between past and present, a kind of homesickness that produces wandering, making possible a fluid apprehension of possible associations.
stands (or, rather, *strives*) in sharp contrast with Benjamin’s and Surrealism’s object-oriented interest in melancholy. Surrealism, as Peter Nicholls observes, is the only major avant garde movement that “rejects the trope of mastery”\(^6^1\) (289). However, Pensky fails to mention another possible allusion here, of possible significance, which also involves Nietzsche and which raises a different set of questions about Surrealism in relation to Nietzsche’s “cheerful” avant-garde. The letters on the blue accordion that spell out “pessimism” may allude to Apollinaire’s essay review of a reprinted edition of the poems of Baudelaire. In his review, written from an early twentieth-century vantage point, Apollinaire took issue with Baudelaire’s decadent “pessimism.” This is criticism written under the influence of Nietzsche, who repeatedly writes of nineteenth-century “pessimism” as an attitude and a pose just as decadent as optimism (and contrasts both attitudes with “fatalism” and “instinct”). The allusion, intended or not, also establishes an important connection between Nietzsche’s overcoming melancholy and the early avant garde, all within the context of a *fin de siècle* discourse on decadence and a “healthy-minded” avant-garde rejection of what it saw as decadent Symbolist aesthetics.

It is Nietzsche who, perhaps more than any other major philosopher, seeks to transform philosophy itself into a therapeutic and aesthetic practice with the aim of producing a charge and transforming a life. Rilke’s “Du muss dein Leben anderen!” (“You must change your life!”)\(^6^2\) could serve as a one-line distillation of Nietzsche’s entire philosophy — as long as we acknowledge that Rilke’s line occurs as the climax and culmination of a poem that articulates and realizes a power, rather than the rallying cry that appears on the final page of a self-help guide. Nietzsche conceives of art as having the power to transform a life as well as having a force within the world — and this is not to be confused with the imperative to live one’s life as if it were a work of art. There is a ministerial thrust to Nietzsche’s thought and writing, however, that does indeed sound at times like direct and practical advice for how to

\(^{61}\) There is another way of identifying the versions of “avant-garde melancholy” that Nietzsche and Benjamin represent. In his book *Homo Aestheticus*, Luc Ferry identifies two “moments” of the avant-garde aesthetic: “the hyperindividualistic iconoclasm of creating something entirely new, and the hyperrealistic striving to achieve an extraordinary truth.” Both may be construed as moments of the avant garde anti-art aesthetic, and (with some qualification) they describe the two very different versions of, and impulses behind, avant-garde anti-art that are represented by Nietzsche’s “hyperindividualistic iconoclasm” and Benjamin’s interest in recovering what he called “images of truth.” For a fascinating meditation on the tension between *creation* and *discovery*, written from a Surrealist perspective, see Giorgio de Chirico’s Nietzsche-inspired experimental novel *Hebdomeros* (from which I quote at the head of this chapter, and which I discussed briefly at the end of the Introduction).

\(^{62}\) The concluding line to Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo.”
live one’s life. And Nietzsche’s often poetically charged writing and explosive aphorisms aim to work
upon the reader in the manner of a personal intervention, aiming to quicken the pulse and to make the
heart race, to have something like the life-changing effect that Benjamin describes in his first experience
of reading Paysan de Paris. In his study of Nietzsche’s philosophy, David Allison also captures both the
critical and therapeutic dimensions of Nietzsche’s modernism. Nietzsche, Allison notes, addresses each
of his readers as a friend. What Nietzsche offers us is not wisdom or knowledge, but what often sounds
like a “self-help” plan for changing our lives:

No great revelations, no absolute knowledge. No timeless, leaden certainties – but things
do look a bit different now, and one gets a better perspective on things, new
perspectives, a nuanced appreciation. [...] And things take on a patina in turn, a
sensuous immediacy, the way one feels after a long illness, when rediscovering the
simple fact that sunlight is itself a medium of pleasure, or when warm voices and laughter
once again drift up from the evening boulevard below. (vii)

Nietzsche wants us, each of us, to overcome our “illness” by converting it into a new source of vitality,
even a new source of pleasure; only then, and not by conscious force of will, can one achieve what
Allison describes as “a new perspective on things.” And Nietzsche himself repeatedly celebrates the fact
of his own illness, embracing it as a fate and as an opportunity for renewed contact with the energies of
life.

If we are looking to read Nietzsche’s interest in melancholy within a discursive context, the
thematic clues are not difficult to find. As we shall see, Nietzsche’s writing is a virtual catalog of historical
allusions and motifs that place him (along with Benjamin) within a long history of attempts to redefine
melancholy that also create new ways of being melancholy. What I want to begin to draw attention to is
the distinctly modernist critical and visionary dimensions that mark both Benjamin’s and Nietzsche’s
thinking about melancholy, even if their visionary projects pursue different paths. Like Benjamin,
Nietzsche treats melancholy as a culturally constructed and historically contingent affective posture. At
the same time, however, both see in melancholy itself a means of “opening up alternative frameworks”
(as Eric Santner phrases it in the passage quoted earlier). And although Nietzsche's visionary project is
an attempt (through art) to inspire individual readers to change their lives, it is important to appreciate
what Nietzsche always emphasized as the world-historical significance of overcoming a given form of
melancholy (associated with a certain form of nihilism) by transforming it from within. Nietzsche's
alternative to passive nihilism was an active nihilism. In his famous lectures in the 1930s, Heidegger
suggested that Nietzsche's Will to Power represents both the transcendence and the consummation of
nihilism.

The critical and polemical side of Nietzsche's "philosophizing with a hammer" is also hard to miss.
Nietzsche speaks to us as friend and confidant, but he is also notoriously contemptuous toward those
who represent cultural decadence and every tendency that is opposed to strength and health. The
question is how Nietzsche's thinking about melancholy figures into that diagnostic and critical project.
Nietzsche envisions the Will to Power as an alternative to the Will to Truth, and active nihilism as
overcoming one paradigm by transforming it; that much is certainly clear. But if we want to make a
connection between the cultural challenge of nihilism and melancholy as the "ailment of the age" (as
Kierkegaard once called it), then one way to bring out this connection is to read Nietzsche as anticipating
Lacan's critique of melancholy in terms of imaginary projections. The "illness" Nietzsche writes of is not
his or ours alone; it is the illness of our time, an illness we succumb to when we find ourselves trapped
within the psychic economy of our culture and identify with one of the images for the self that it offers.
That is why the personal project of overcoming illness through transforming it has world-historical
significance and we might note (for example) the closely interwoven private/public language employed in
Nietzsche's preface to The Gay Science (which may be the closest thing to a distillation of Nietzsche's
entire anti-philosophical project, and not least by virtue of its characteristic pose of waiting for a future
transformation):

I am still waiting for a philosophical physician in the exceptional sense of that word—one
who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity—
to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what
was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all "truth" but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life. *(Gay Science 35)*

For Nietzsche, there is a connection between Kierkegaard’s “ailment of the age” and the values sustained by an epistemic culture that was the dominant culture in Nietzsche’s time (and arguably remains so) – a culture based on a Will to Truth, on the opposition between appearance and reality, and one that defined knowledge as accurate representation. 63 In Chapter Three, I will read Freud’s theory of melancholy itself as illustrating a form of melancholy associated with the epistemic values that Nietzsche and many other modernists found problematic.

It is important to recognize how Nietzsche’s cultural and psychological critique puts immense pressure on his visionary model for overcoming the epistemic form of melancholy he diagnoses. Nietzsche’s ideal hero – and that means, ideally, the individual reader whose life is transformed – must find some way to avoid identifying with that most powerful image for the self that any culture has to offer: the figure of the outsider to culture, the one who (along with his friend and confidant, Nietzsche) has seen farther than everyone else, whose sense of isolation and even suffering (like Zarathustra’s) can serve to validate and reinforce a powerful image of the self-as-hero with which the average individual is all too eager to identify. It is no wonder that Nietzsche’s mode of address has found a perennially receptive audience among future generations of adolescent readers. Nietzsche’s solution is to replace images of the self with a model of a self as perpetually in flux – what Henry Staten calls Nietzsche’s “exploding hero.” This heroic activity of remaking of the self demands a constant unmaking and erasure of prior selves. In order to see farther than others and also avoid the imaginary seductions of a static self-image, Nietzsche’s Overman must overcome himself. Melancholy has an important function in this project of self-transformation and self-overcoming; for if the melancholic can feel a sense of alienation from the world so extreme that it also “loosens individuality like a bad tooth,” then melancholy can function as a solvent that facilitates the experimental project of making and remaking the self.

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63 As Heidegger observed in his lectures of the 1930s: “For Nietzsche, nihilism is not in any way simply a phenomenon of decay; rather nihilism is, as the fundamental event of Western history, simultaneously and above all the intrinsic law of that history” (qtd. in Bull Nietzsche’s *Negative Ecologies* 36). Perhaps the most direct influence of Nietzsche’s account of nihilism may be seen in Max Weber’s concept of the disenchantment of modernity, and not the more conventional pessimism that finds expression in Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents.
Nietzsche gives art and a self-reflexive articulation a central role in this visionary project of overcoming melancholy. But Nietzsche’s transformation of melancholy also calls for a new concept of the aesthetic itself, so that art is no longer thought of as a consolation for the pain and the shortcomings of existence (as Schopenhauer defined the function of art) or as a narcotic “cure for boredom” (as Nietzsche himself, under the spell of Richard Wagner, had once described most art). For Nietzsche the post-Romantic and proto-modernist, art becomes an activity, the exemplary means of creating new value. Nietzsche, unlike Lacan, does not simply allude to art; he adopts art as a way of doing philosophy, and he envisions art as an alternative to epistemic values. The Gay Science (1882), for example, reflects even in its title the critical and visionary dimensions of Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values.\(^{64}\) Nietzsche identified The Gay Science (1882) as his most personal work, and as a “medial” work that helped him transition to the next phase of his life and thinking. We can now read The Gay Science as the first in a series of experimental works culminating in Ecce Homo (1888), which can all be read as attempts to transform the mode of confessional writing (traditionally aimed at self-representation and self-interpretation) into an avant-garde performative mode in which the “I” is forced at every step to become an other. “The noble type of man,” Nietzsche writes, “experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges ... it is value creating” (Geneaology 39). Notoriously, these artist-heroes who create new value must also develop – in parallel, so to speak, with their “experience” of self-becoming – a sharp awareness of their difference from the “herd” and the values by which they live their lives. In order to be exemplary, one must be an exceptional and superior “type.” Just how it is that one can experience oneself as determining values without at the same time succumbing to the imaginary allure of heroic self-identification – or what Nietzsche called the image of the “counterfeit great man” – is a challenge and a paradox that we will look at more closely in a later chapter.

3. **Benjamin, Nietzsche, and the Image of Modernism**

Benjamin and Nietzsche thus represent two experimental ways of thinking about melancholy that are radically different from each other, even incompatible, and yet both recognizably modernist. The

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\(^{64}\) “Gay science” alludes to the techniques of the early troubadours (*gai saber*) as representing a model of art as performance, and at the same time inverts Carlyle’s famous nineteenth-century description of economics as the “dismal science.”
iconography of melancholy allows us to associate their visions with vividly contrasting images. While Benjamin drew attention to the stone motif in Dürer’s image of winged melancholy, one of the scattered objects depicted. Nietzsche is what Surrealist critic Gaston Bachelard characterized as an “ascensional poet,” whose imagination takes flight in defiance of the force of gravity and in contempt of (aversion to) inert and lifeless matter.65 (104). “It was from this aversion,” Nietzsche writes in Ecce Homo, describing himself in the third-person, “that he grew wings to ‘soar off into distant futures’ (Basic Writings 787). Nietzsche, Bachelard notes, is not a “poet of matter.” For Nietzsche, the material imagination gives us only “sleep and dreams and unformulated will.” Inert matter is a provocation, a necessary obstacle and a stimulus for the gravity-defying will to power:

A path that ascended defiantly through stones, malicious, lonely ... a mountain path crunched under the defiance of my foot66 ... Upward – defying the spirit that drew it

65 I am referring to Chapter 5 of Bachelard’s Air and Dreams: “Nietzsche and the Ascensional Psyche.” This brilliantly idiosyncratic reading of Nietzsche is one of the underappreciated gems of Nietzschean criticism; I also believe it is the closest thing to a reading of Nietzsche that we might have gotten from William James. One of my melancholy regrets, as I completed this study, is that I had to sacrifice a chapter-length discussion of Bachelard and James as an unwarranted digression from the main line of my argument. Bachelard’s 1939 study of Lautreamont, incidentally, to which the chapter on Nietzsche reads as something of a sequel, joins the company of Jean Paulhan’s The Flowers of Tarbes as one of the finest works of Surrealist criticism, as well as (I would argue) one of the most important texts of late modernism.

There is much more critical work to be done on Bachelard’s version of Surrealism. Although I do not have space here to elaborate on the juxtaposition, Bachelard is to my mind the most Jamesian of French modernist thinkers. If we want a compelling philosophical case for aesthetic practices and for the imagination more generally, an adequate response to Adorno’s call in “Looking Back on Surrealism” that is Jamesian in spirit, then Bachelard’s work beginning in the 1930s gives us something close to that. Consider also, for example, the uncanny resemblance between James’s account of the epileptic patient and this passage from Bachelard’s Poetics of Space, which gives us the latter’s version of “total reaction upon life”:

In quoting this fragment [from Lithuanian poet Oscar Milosz], I have sought to present an unusually complete experience of a gloomy daydream, the daydream of a human being who sits motionless in his corner, where he finds a world grown old and worn. Incidentally, I should like to point out the power that an adjective acquires, as soon as it is applied to life. A gloomy life, or a gloomy person, marks an entire universe with more than just a pervading coloration. Even things become crystallizations of sadness, regret, or nostalgia. And when a philosopher looks to poets ... for lessons in how to individualize the world, he soon becomes convinced that the world is not so much a noun as an adjective. Indeed, to those who want to find the essence of a world philosophy, one could give the following advice – look for its adjective. (43-44)

66 It is very tempting to juxtapose this passage with Walser’s meditation on ash (which we looked at in the introduction). This is one of the many juxtapositions that tempt us to think of Walser as the “anti-
downward toward the abyss, the spirit of gravity, my devil and archenemy. Upward – although he sat on me, half dwarf, half mole, lame, making lame, dripping lead into my ear, leaden thoughts into my brain. (Portable Nietzsche 268)

Here we see the source of Aragon’s allusion to the dwarf figure, sounding no less odd in the original context. In spite of the scenic backdrop, there is also a rigorously non-atmospheric anthropomorphizing of nature that attributes agency to natural forces – the “lonely path that ascended defiantly” is analogous to the defiance with which he “crunches” the path under his foot. The defining feature of a Dionysian philosophy – what Nietzsche calls its “decisive” [entscheidend] feature – is “the affirmation of passing away and destroying” (729).

Nietzsche’s programmatic aversion would become, in the not-too-distant future, the driving spirit behind the transgressive activities of the modernist avant garde. Nietzsche is the prophet of modernism and of a certain strain of anti-art aestheticism; he predicted that his greatest impact would come only after 1900, and he was right. Benjamin was born into the revolution that Nietzsche helped to bring about. This belatedness gave Benjamin a vantage point from which he could assess the first wave of creative-transgressive activity as it had already played itself out. Benjamin’s modernism was retrospective and ambivalent. At the same time, Benjamin aligned himself with a late avant-garde movement that attracted him in no small part because of its distance from earlier Nietzsche-inspired movements such as Dada and Futurism. Nietzsche’s ideal of the visionary, iconoclastic outsider was an inspiration for such movements and for the artists associated with them. On occasion, in certain moods, Benjamin could fantasize about the Nietzschean “destructive character.” But he also had deep reservations about the avant garde’s embrace of disruptive innovation as an end in itself, its commitment to an active nihilism that, to Benjamin, seemed little more than an accelerated version of earlier myths of progress. While Nietzsche’s impact on modernism is hard to ignore, the revolutionary import of Benjamin’s modernism is more difficult to assess. He spent most of his life as an émigre, a solitary outsider known only to a select few readers. He was a Surrealist who did not participate in the movement, a radical thinker who refused membership in any political party and whose revolutionary activity did not extend much beyond association with Bertolt Nietzsche.” But the relationship is a bit more complicated, and far more interesting (as I will try to show later).
Brecht. He rejected theory and systematic thinking, but his alternative was anything but practical or pragmatic.

What is most radical in Benjamin’s thought, moreover, tends to be what is most idiosyncratic, even esoteric. While Benjamin’s peculiar brand of Surrealism borrowed from avant-garde aesthetic practices, it culminated in something entirely different: an attempt to replace the interpretive methods of conventional historiography with a highly unorthodox “constellation” method. The theoretical basis for that method, as I indicated earlier, is underdeveloped and at times opaque. At one point, Benjamin defined the central concept of the “dialectical image” as “that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning [and] enter into legibility at a specific time.” Benjamin wanted to replace top-down theory with a method that would allow historical data to “enter into legibility” and speak for itself. But in spite of the patient and earnest efforts of later critics, nobody has yet been able to translate Benjamin’s provocative language into the legibility required for a practical and usable method. As Max Pensky notes, it remains far from clear whether the concept of the dialectical image, the central concept of Benjamin’s project, represents “the guarantee of Benjamin’s continuing relevance, or the limits of his relevance” (“Method and Time” 179).

This failure does not make the Arcades project any less fascinating or important as a modernist text, but it does cast the work in a somewhat different light. The question, then, is what we are to make of Benjamin’s modernist melancholy if the experimental method, and the theory on which that method is based, resist all attempts to treat them in methodological or theoretical terms. One option would be abandon our demand for theoretical clarity and instead try to understand Benjamin’s significance within a longer history of thinking about melancholy. We can treat that history on the “paradigm shift” model, as a succession of theories and definitions displacing or building upon one another. But we can also read these attempts to define and redefine melancholy as a history of projected ideals and models of heroism, a history made legible in a series of iconic images. This is the genealogical approach taken by Benjamin and Nietzsche. It is also a context in which we might approach their own revolutionary but non-theoretical contributions within that history. In place of the archetypal image of Dürer’s winged melancholy, we get the figure of Nietzsche’s Übermensch as an idealized figure that we may infer from numerous passages;
and in place of the Übermensch, we have Benjamin’s allegorical reading of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* that transformed an obscure image into an icon of modernist melancholy.

And then there is the image of Benjamin himself. In her 1979 profile of Benjamin, Susan Sontag analyzes a series of photographs taken over the course of two decades as aspects of one portrait – the portrait of a saturnine temperament. Benjamin is often looking downward, with what Sontag describes as the “soft, daydreamer’s gaze of the myopic” (109). In one of the photographs, taken in the 1930s, he is sitting at a table in a library bent over a book and taking notes (perhaps gathering material for the *Arcades* project). His photographic pose corresponds almost exactly to that of the seated figure in Dürer’s etching. The image of Benjamin as a melancholy “type,” which becomes legible within a broader iconography, also captures some of the paradoxes that distinguish Benjamin’s specifically modernist melancholy: a forward-looking, visionary project captured in a myopic but intense downward gaze; a special mode of empathy that somehow derives from a fixation on the inorganic and creaturely; a radical materialism that locates the potential for revolutionary change in lifeless and inert objects.

Photographs of Nietzsche capture a similar downward gaze. What matters, of course, is not so much the fact that Benjamin or Nietzsche suffered from bouts of depression or “were” melancholy by temperament. The biographical evidence is fairly clear in both cases, and their writing attests to an uncanny degree of self-awareness. One could even make the case that Benjamin’s engagement with Surrealism (and his later association with Bertolt Brecht) was motivated in part by a self-willed, therapeutic effort to overcome his own saturnine penchant for the esoteric by transforming the intensity of a melancholy gaze into an exoteric and revolutionary project. Benjamin’s alignment with the avant garde then begins to resemble Nietzsche’s self-help program. There is no need, however, for a Freudian biographical reading of their private struggles to overcome paralysis and despair. If we want to understand the visionary and heroic dimensions of their modernist melancholy, then the important question to ask is how Benjamin and Nietzsche succeeded in transforming a temperamental limitation into modes of fascination that had revolutionary and world-historical significance. And new forms of

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67 In Nietzsche’s case, these experiences were accompanied by (or, as Nietzsche would have put, *inseparable from*) some excruciating physical symptoms. Nietzsche reports suffering from intense migraine headaches that lasted as long as a week. When Nietzsche writes about being attentive to one’s body, an almost obsessive theme in his work, we should remember that he is writing from the perspective of a post-convalescent sufferer of migraines – an uncanny state of mind familiar to anyone who suffers from migraines.
heroism, envisioned as alternatives to the myopia and paralysis of an entire culture, demand neither psychological explanation nor philosophical justification.

The differences between the visionary modernism of Nietzsche and Benjamin are as striking as the similarities and have a different kind of historical resonance. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to speak of Nietzsche’s concept of melancholy as corresponding to any ethical or political stance in the same way Surrealism aligned itself in the 1920s with the revolutionary aspirations of the Communist party. This does not mean, of course, that Nietzsche would escape from the ironies of history. One of the earliest movements to take its inspiration from Nietzsche was Futurism. In the rhetoric of the early Futurist manifestos, we often hear a voice that picks up on Nietzsche’s:

Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber. We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist. (in Marinetti 49)

More than a century has passed since the publication of the first Futurist manifesto, and it is now difficult to imagine the impact that such language might have had upon readers in 1909. Nietzsche’s hyperbolic calls for a heroic, warlike age would soon come to pass in the century he anticipated; his lonely path to victory would become congested with processions of people moving in double march. The paradoxes that Nietzsche embraced (including the idea of overcoming melancholy through transforming it) now seem, in retrospect, more like a preparation for the well-known contradictions that would define

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68 In the section of the *Arcades* projects on “Boredom, Eternal Return,” we find this remark from Benjamin on Nietzsche: “There is a handwritten draft in which Caesar instead of Zarathustra is the bearer of Nietzsche’s tidings. That is of little moment. It underscores the fact that Nietzsche had an inkling of his doctrine’s complicity with imperialism” (117). Throughout this section (known as “Convolute D”), Benjamin’s treatment of Nietzsche relies heavily on Karl Löwith’s 1935 study *Nietzsche’s Philosophy and the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, one of the more notable scholarly attempts to reclaim Nietzsche from political misreadings. Löwith nevertheless places Nietzsche in a Hegelian tradition of thinking, which also aligns Nietzsche with the Hegelian thinking on history and progress that were the objects of Benjamin’s critique.

Löwith would find a receptive reader in Walter Benjamin. But most intellectuals in 1930s Europe had more immediate concerns. The time for correcting misreadings had already passed. Löwith himself, who was part Jewish, was forced to leave Germany for Japan, where he was once again forced to leave, eventually ending up in New York City (where he joined the company his fellow refugee, Theodor Adorno, at the New School for Social Research). André Breton was also on his way to New York City by boat, passing the time in conversation with another passenger and fellow refugee, Claude Levi Strauss.
modernism itself: the compatibility of a reactionary politics and a revolutionary aesthetic, a critique of the perceived decadence of modernity that could easily dovetail with a revolutionary nostalgia for an imagined heroic past. Nietzsche’s own politics are ambiguous at best. The Italian Futurists, on the other hand, were far more decisive in their world-historical commitments when they allied themselves with a political movement in the 1920s whose charismatic leader once declared, in an interview, that the two most important influences for his own revolutionary philosophy of fascism were the writings of Nietzsche and the American pragmatist William James.69

Our challenge today is to read Nietzsche’s visionary project outside the historical context of modernism – or at least to recognize those aspects of Nietzsche’s thought that transcend what now seem dangerous tendencies within modernism. Nietzsche was fond of addressing his future readers. We are those future readers, and as his “friends,” we always find ourselves in the awkward position of having to defend Nietzsche from possible and actual misreadings. We do so by brooding over his texts and giving more careful interpretations of their “actual” meaning – in other words, reading him exactly the way he asked us not to. Nietzsche the visionary modernist is burdened by the weight of history that he sought to overcome through the creatively necessary acts of self-abandonment and forgetting. When Apollinaire asked “who are the great forgetters?” (in his poem “Toujours”), he was channeling Nietzsche’s voice into the language of the avant-garde manifesto.

Benjamin’s criticism of Nietzsche in the Trauerspiel study would find an echo a decade later in the 1936 essay “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In its well-known climax, Benjamin’s essay characterizes Futurism and the avant-garde as the culmination of a nihilist art-for-art’s-sake aestheticism that allowed people a self-alienated, disengaged vantage point from which to contemplate the spectacle of their own annihilation as “an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” When Heidegger argued in his lectures on Nietzsche that overcoming nihilism involved its transformation, he was offering this partly as a defense of Nietzsche’s ideas at a historical moment when the discourse about health and illness and talk of overcoming cultural problems had reached its culmination in the category of Entartete Kunst (“decadent art”) in which Paul Klee’s work was placed along with the experimental work of many other modernists. While Heidegger was giving his talks in Germany, one

69 For a brief account of Mussolini’s interview (in which he names Nietzsche and James as influences) the response of James’s former students, see Gerald Myers (414-15).
stray work of Klee’s – the “Angelus Novus” – was hidden away in a Paris library along with other papers left behind by their owner, Walter Benjamin, who was at that moment literally in flight from the forces of history, making his arduous ascent over the Pyrenees on a lonely mountain path worn down by a procession of refugees who were on their way to a port town in Spain.

At the risk of sounding tendentious, I argue that what is at stake in these different images of modernist melancholy is no less than the image of modernism itself and its ability to respond to the historical crisis that it diagnosed so clearly. These versions of heroic melancholy we have been looking at correspond to fundamentally different visions of modernism as a visionary endeavor, aspiring to something more than critical power and a keen but essentially powerless (and paralysis-inducing) sense of history. Benjamin’s heroic melancholy remains relevant, if only because it offers us a much-needed alternative to what we, along with Benjamin, find ethically and ideologically unpalatable in Nietzsche’s concept of power and ideal of heroism. Nietzsche urges us to forget the past as a precondition for creating our own future; Benjamin invokes the past in a revolutionary attempt to redeem both the present moment and a possible future from the dream time of progress-obsessed modernity. Nietzsche’s idealizes heroic individualism, a will to power that is responsive the “not-I” and seeks to exploit that otherness, as a means to an end, in an unending project of creating new selves. Benjamin’s Angel of History – an image of fragility and ephemerality, of bearing witness to catastrophe – idealizes heroism and responsiveness of an entirely different kind. Benjamin’s personal fate only reinforces his image as the “anti-Nietzsche,” which in turn invites us to mythologize modernism retrospectively, through the catastrophe of its failed ambitions, while at the same time we idealize the act of recognition and bearing witness (which does not even count as a “revolutionary experience”). But if we want to appeal to modernism as a “live option” and see in it what Benjamin called the “recognizability of Now” – in other words, to see it as offering real alternatives to the problems of modernity that remain with us, rather than exemplifying those problems in an extreme form – then we need to emphasize what is forward-looking and visionary in the modernism of Benjamin and Nietzsche, and recognize their efforts to develop a responsiveness to what is genuinely new.

4. Adorno, Looking Back on Surrealism
Of the many critiques of Surrealist orthodoxy by Surrealism’s “enemies from within” (as George Bataille referred to himself), the most philosophically acute and devastating critique would come from Benjamin’s close friend, Theodor Adorno, in his 1956 essay “Looking Back on Surrealism,” written after the war and more than a decade after Benjamin’s suicide. Adorno’s critique is all the more devastating because so much of his own philosophy was subsequently derived from the Trauerspiel study and from Benjamin’s thinking on melancholy as method. No-one could accuse Adorno of a gross misreading or a misunderstanding; he understood better than anyone else the significance of Benjamin’s theory of melancholy as well as its connection with Surrealism.

Adorno’s assessment of Surrealism is anything but cheerful. The first challenge faced by the reader is to read it on two distinct levels, as simultaneously a response to both Breton’s and Benjamin’s not altogether compatible versions of Surrealism. This dual critique makes an interpretation of the essay an even more complicated task; indeed, the presence of this subtext may puzzle readers for whom Surrealism means French Surrealism and the standard account publicized and documented in Breton’s first and second manifestos. We find, for one thing, a somewhat confusing blend of terms found in these two versions of Surrealism, some of the language we associate with Benjamin – the terms “truth content” and “dialectical image,” for example – mixed in with Breton’s standard and much better-promoted version. The reason Adorno does not mention Benjamin by name is simple: In 1956, few people knew Benjamin’s name, let alone his work, and Adorno was still in the process of editing the first collected edition of his work. Benjamin was not widely known as an important figure in European thought, let alone in connection with Surrealism.

Adorno’s first order of business is Surrealists’ appeal to Freud’s dream theory. Freud is a fairly easy target for Adorno, and there no effort made here to distinguish between Benjamin’s interest in the

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70 For another assessment of Adorno’s essay on Surrealism, see Wolin 1997.
71 Adorno’s 1931 study of Kierkegaard was inspired by the Trauerspiel study to the extent that it may be read as a sequel or companion work. Adorno was also the first to teach the Trauerspiel study in a university seminar (in the early 1930s) – at a time when Benjamin’s book was not widely read and known to many of the people who had read it as a failed (and mostly unreadable) doctoral project. In Kierkegaard study, Adorno’s first published book, we see nearly all of the main themes and concerns that Adorno would elaborate upon, with remarkable consistency, in the remaining decades of his life.
72 It was Adorno, in fact, who first recommended Breton’s Communicating Vessels to Benjamin when it first appeared in 1933.
Freudian concept unconscious and Breton's or Dali's interest in dream as a "superior realm" of authentic associations. The problem, for Adorno, is not Freud's theory or the validity of the science behind it; he draws attention, rather to the more fundamental problem of Surrealism's reliance upon theory and its appeal to scientific explanations as the basis for its methods and technique:

What is deadly about the interpretation of art, moreover, even philosophically responsible interpretation, is that in the process of conceptualizing it is forced to express what is strange and surprising in terms of what is already familiar ... To the extent to which works of art insist on explanation, every one of them, even if against its own intentions, perpetrates a piece of betrayal to conformity. (86)

As a scientific account, moreover, Freud's theory "does not do justice to the matter. That is not the way people dream; no one dreams that way. Surrealist constructions are merely analogous to dreams, no more" (87).

After dispensing with Freud and Surrealism's dependence on a problematic account of the dream state, Adorno then moves on to more serious matters and his critique of the ontological status of the Surrealist image – the "spark of the image" that is supposed to be the byproduct of Surrealist constructions and the dream-logic of their uncanny juxtapositions. Here it is Benjamin who (in retrospect) seems more clearly the target. What Adorno has in mind is Benjamin's related concept of the dialectical image, or what he called "dialectics at a standstill," which represented a means of recovering the image unmediated by the role of the subject, an "image of truth" attained through what Benjamin called the "death of subjective intention." As Adorno realized as early as the 1930s, these were large claims, ambiguously philosophical and theological. Adorno's critique of the claims made for Surrealist techniques apply as well to Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image. Adorno felt that the melancholy subject had not been transformed and overcome in Surrealism – it had merely been cancelled. What Benjamin had called "the death of subjective intention" does not allow for unmediated access to an "image of truth." In its undialectical concept of the image and the material object, Adorno claims, Surrealist materialism

73 Benjamin also had a (highly qualified) interest in the Jungian notion of a collective unconscious, an interest which Adorno clearly did not share and for which he had little patience.
ironically reverts to a form of philosophical idealism. These problems, moreover, attach to any concept of melancholy as a philosophical method for achieving unmediated contact with the images of the objective world. In Surrealist constructions, “there is a shattering and a regrouping, but no dissolution”:

The subject, which is at work much more openly and uninhibitedly in Surrealism than in the dream, directs its energy toward its own self-annihilation, something that requires no energy in the dream; but because of that everything becomes more objective, so to speak, than in the dream, where the subject, absent from the start, colors and permeates everything that happens from the wings.74 (87)

What Benjamin and the Surrealists had identified as the revolutionary power of the obsolete and the out-of-date is in fact, Adorno writes, an “expression of a subjectivity that has become estranged from itself as well as from the world. The tension in Surrealism that is discharged in shock is the tension between schizophrenia and reification.” This tension, Adorno suggests, is not psychological in nature, but rather a byproduct of the disenchantment of modernity and the societal phenomena of reification and alienation. Adorno nevertheless gives a brief account of the subject’s experience of melancholy alienation, of absolute subjectivity thrown back upon itself, the experience Aragon describes in Paysan de Paris as the vertiginous gulf between the “land of disorder” and the sense of a world “illuminated by my instincts”:

In the face of total reification, which throws it back upon itself and its protest, a subject that has become absolute, that has full control of itself and is free of all consideration of the empirical world, reveals itself to be inanimate, something virtually dead. The dialectical images of Surrealism are images of a dialectic of subjective freedom in a situation of objective unfreedom. (88)

74 Critic Bill Brown formulates this subject-object dialectic in perhaps its simplest possible terms: “the effort to redeem things results in a subjectification of objects that in turn results in a kind of objectification of subjects” (17).
Surrealism, Adorno concludes, “must be understood not as a language of immediacy but as witness to abstract freedom’s reversion to the supremacy of objects. The montages of Surrealism,” he continues, “are the true still lives. In making compositions out of what is out of date, they create *natur morte*” (89).

For Adorno, the uncanny images of Surrealism, Aragon’s annihilating image that forces us to revise the entire universe, can in fact only register the alienation of the subject in a “situation of objective unfreedom.” They are “historical images in which the subject’s innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical” (89). What Benjamin called redemptive “images of truth” are, more strictly speaking, images of a contingent *social* truth. As a final blow, Adorno concludes his critique with the observation that Surrealism “forms the complement” to the contemporary *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the German movement whose “leftist melancholy” Benjamin had been the target of Benjamin’s critique in his essay of 1931. At the time Adorno was writing in the 1950s, few readers would have been in a position to appreciate the personal subtext of this reference; it is thus a highly personal and anguished summation of what Adorno felt was a fundamentally misguided effort and a closed chapter in the history of modernism. Surrealism itself “is obsolete”: that is Adorno’s final verdict. Following the real catastrophe of the war, Surrealist shocks “had lost all their force,” and the most that could be said for Surrealism in retrospect, Adorno observes, was that it “save[d] Paris by preparing it for fear”75 (90).

5. CODA: Adorno and Critical versus Visionary Modernisms (Revisited)

The fact remains, nevertheless, that Benjamin’s chief contribution to Adorno’s thinking was – put simply – to make the entire course of his thinking possible. In his wartime work *Minima Moralia* there is a well-known passage whose language echoes the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and captures Adorno’s debt to Benjamin, as well as offers us a rather personal portrait of his thinking at the time and the way it had been shaped (understandably) by the context of world events and the pain he felt over Benjamin’s recent suicide and the fact of his own exile:

75 This sentiment was actually echoed by Breton himself in the years following the war.
The only philosophy that can be practiced responsibly in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, that reveal its fissures and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will one day appear in the Messianic light. (247)

Siegfried Kracauer’s account of the melancholy method of redemptive criticism, which I quoted from in the Introduction, actually appears in a review of Adorno’s 1930 book on Kierkegaard. One thing missing from Kracauer’s account is any mention of Surrealism, or even the period of literary activity that is the occasion for Benjamin’s insights. And the “school of thought” that Kracauer refers to was perhaps something of an overstatement at the time; that school consisted mainly of two individuals, both in exile, who were in close correspondence throughout the 1930s.

How, then, are we to account for this divergence, given their close methodological affinity, and especially since Adorno’s method of “negative dialectics” owes so much to Benjamin’s thinking about melancholy and allegory? Where, exactly, do they diverge in their concepts of critique? One possible explanation comes from Adorno’s student, Jürgen Habermas, who contrasted Benjamin’s redemptive critique with Adorno’s ideological critique as two fundamentally different conceptions of melancholy as method, both drawing their inspiration from Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study. However, I think we can locate another source for the difference. “Looking Back on Surrealism” is a lament over what Adorno saw as Benjamin’s misguided romance with Surrealism, and it can also be read as an epilogue to the well-known exchange of correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno in the late 1930s (while Adorno was living in America). The so-called Adorno-Benjamin debate deals centrally with the question of whether, and how, avant-garde techniques (like montage) can be transposed into a research method like the one Benjamin was carrying out in the Arcades project. But another issue much-discussed in the 1930s, a matter of contention, was the more general question of aesthetic autonomy and its conflict with the anti-art aesthetic of the avant garde. Surrealist works, Benjamin wrote, were not “literature.” The function of critique for Benjamin is to “mortify” the work so as to “transpose it from the medium of beauty to the
medium of truth – and thereby to redeem it.” As a chapter in the history of modernist aesthetics, the Benjamin-Adorno debate of the 1930s deserves all the attention it has received. Adorno’s 1955 essay revisits the debate over aesthetic autonomy. Responding to Benjamin’s anti-art and revolutionary tendencies in a letter to Benjamin written in 1937, Adorno claimed that Nietzsche is more “revolutionary” than Bakunin; at another point in their correspondence, he urges Benjamin to focus his energies on a study of Mallarmé (rather than waste his time, presumably, in the company of Bertolt Brecht). One thing Adorno does not criticize Surrealism for, in “Looking Back on Surrealism,” is its status as an aesthetic movement. In fact, he takes its anti-art aesthetic to task for aspiring to the condition of science, for trying to replace the conventional bourgeois notion of art with an equally problematic scientism. So Adorno’s essay indicates one possible trajectory that their debate might have taken had it resumed in the 1950s. What would a Surrealist aesthetic look like, in which art does not simply “batter its own foundations” (as Adorno puts it in the “Looking Back” essay) and instead re-affirms its autonomy from disenchanted science and philosophy and in defiance of the realm of conceptual?

We are given some indication of what it might look like in Adorno’s “The Essay as Form,” a short piece that gradually took shape between 1954 and 1958. It was written during the same period he was writing “Looking Back on Surrealism,” and it stands as something of a companion piece. “The Essay as Form” outlines Adorno’s vision of what a Surrealist aesthetic might look like – an aesthetic that is not “explained” in terms of philosophy, but which nevertheless must be understood in a philosophical context. Here is Adorno on essayism as an aesthetic alternative, a melancholy and “open form” alternative, to the bias of “identarian” thinking that has long dominated philosophy:

The essay does not obey the rules of the game of organized science and theory that, following Spinoza’s principle, the order of things is identical with that of ideas … the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine – deeply rooted since Plato – that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against that ancient injustice toward the transitory.” (158)

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76 Adorno’s comment may be in response to an observation in Benjamin’s 1928 essay on Surrealism: “Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one. They are the first to liquidate the sclerotic-liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom.”
Adorno makes a point of naming Benjamin as among the great practitioners of the essay form – with the implication that perhaps his true calling was not philosophy, but the experimental and artistic medium of the essay. We also see in “The Essay as Form” a continuation of the dialogue with Benjamin, along with more traces of the same barely concealed sense of frustration that manifests itself in “Looking Back on Surrealism.” Carrying on a central theme of “Looking Back on Surrealism,” there is more critique of the avant-garde flirtation with scientism. Adorno is especially concerned with art’s aspiration to be science and to makes scientific criteria its standard:

When technique is made absolute in the art-work; when construction becomes total, eliminating what motivates it and what resists it, expression; when art claims to be science and makes scientific criteria its standard, it sanctions a crude preartistic manipulation of raw material as devoid of meaning as all the talk about “Being” in philosophical seminars. (155-56)

Once more, we see a continuation of Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s concept of melancholy as method. His concept of this philosophical tendency, as evidenced in this passage, here encompasses a wide range of targets – and it includes, perhaps surprisingly, a sharp rebuke to Benjamin in the revisited context of their earlier debate in the 1930s. The allusion to Heidegger is unambiguous (the “jargon of authenticity” would become the title of Adorno’s book-length critique of Heidegger). Here, however, Adorno seems to take issue with Benjamin’s unwitting lapse into the positivism that he thought he was rejecting. The reference to Benjamin becomes more clear as Adorno aligns his critique of the jargon of authenticity with what he identifies as the positivist impulse underlying Benjamin’s redemptive criticism:

Out of the violence that image and concept do to one another in such writings springs the jargon of authenticity in which words tremble as though possessed, while remaining secretive about that which possesses them. The ambitious transcendence of language beyond its meaning results in a meaninglessness that can easily be seized upon by a
positivism to which one thinks oneself superior; and yet, one falls victim to positivism precisely through that meaninglessness that positivism criticizes and which one shares with it. (155)

The association with Heidegger would have been just as much of a shock to Benjamin as Adorno’s equation of his Surrealism with the Neue Sachlichkeit. One thing Adorno and Benjamin shared in the 1930s was a deep aversion to the philosophy of Heidegger. Benjamin is being informed, by his closest friend, that he was an unwitting “victim” of a tendency of thought to which he “thought himself superior.”

However, we also see something more than a sharp critique in “The Essay as Form”; we are also shown a powerful alternative to disenchanted thinking in the essay, which Adorno holds up as a viable mode of resistance to various forms of positivism that result from disenchantment. Adorno contrasts the essay as a mode of inquiry with the methods sanctioned by disenchanted positivism: “Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically,” Adorno observes, “the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done” (153-54). Here Adorno comes as close as he ever would to a Nietzschean (if not quite Dionysian) concept of aesthetic free play and joyous embrace of mere appearance. The “childlike freedom,” moreover, sounds like a version of Kant’s concept of the “free play of the imagination” in his earlier argument for aesthetic autonomy in the Critique of Judgment. So while Adorno avoids the avant-garde search for unmediated experience and the reversion to positivism to which Benjamin and Surrealism fell victim, Adorno himself reverts to a transgressive logic that he criticizes in the avant-garde and ties his defense of aesthetic autonomy to the philosophical project of registering resistance to instrumental reason. While Adorno contrasts the “childlike freedom” of the essay with both instrumental reason and the “suffering countenance” of the autonomous work of art, he still conceives of the essay in terms of its essentially passive resistance to instrumental reason.

While Adorno can claim that the essay “silently abandons the illusion that thought can break out of thesis into physis, out of culture into nature,” and that the essay as form undermines and challenges the notion of unmediated experience, Adorno still requires the notion of a temporal truth revealed negatively in the form of a trace (159). “If truth has in fact a temporal core, then the full historical content
becomes an integral moment in truth” (158). The critical work of the essay also has the negative function of revealing the truth content of the “object” (and once again, the “object” of critique whose truth value is revealed is ambiguously defined): “The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep concealed” (170). After rejecting the transgressive logic of Surrealism, Adorno adopts something like this logic himself – the essay is an anti-epistemic mode of expression. Heresy, however, allows little actual freedom for the essay other than resistance and transgression. “The Essay as Form” also indicates some of the limits of Adorno’s concept of essay as a vehicle of what he calls “ideology critique.” The essay’s critical function requires for its full legibility a certain kind of critical interpretation, and we are thus thrown back into philosophy – Adorno’s philosophy of “immanent criticism” based on the practice of “determinate negation.” The ongoing practice of immanent criticism, or the “dialectical enlightenment of enlightenment,” as Adorno calls it, “discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from [the image's] features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth” (Dialectic of Enlightenment 18). Adorno essay as form that “the essay thinks in fragments, just as reality itself is fragmentary” (25). This reads as a version of Benjamin’s statement that "Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things” (Origin 178). Why, however, must there be a correlation? The heretical function of the essay, in the end, serves the narrow interests of the immanent criticism that is required for the disclosure of truth in the form of the essay (the form that, for Adorno, defines the essay’s function ahead of time). In perhaps the most blunt statement of his concept of the essay in the service of ideological critique, Adorno writes that “the essay remains what it always was, the critical form par excellence; specifically, it constructs the immanent criticism of cultural artifacts, and it confronts that which such artifacts are with their concept; it is the critique of ideology” (166).

There is a parallel, for Adorno, between the critical function of art more generally and the critical function of the essay (always in the context of disenchantment). Why is aesthetic autonomy important for Adorno? On Adorno’s account, autonomy is necessary because it gives art the distance from which it can register its own embeddedness within disenchanted modernity and to become what he calls the
“social antithesis of society” (Aesthetic Theory 8). For Adorno, the autonomy of art is not absolute, but dialectical – and autonomy is both “necessary and illusory.” Adorno wants Nietzschean free play, but he wants it to serve a predetermined function in response to what he calls (in “Essay as Form”) “the reification against which it is the function of functionless art, even today, to raise its own however mute and objectified protest.” This is not exactly a rallying cry for creative artists, let alone essayists, and it is quite far from any notion of annihilating the universe or forcing anyone to revise their universe. In spite of his appeal to Nietzsche, Adorno’s thinking also lies some distance from Nietzsche’s notion of art and aesthetic autonomy (as an alternative to the epistemic Will to Truth). From a Nietzschean point of view, perhaps the most serious problem with Adorno’s account of the essay is that while he claims that essayism occupies a place between science and art, it is still – in the end – dedicated to the critical project of disclosing “truth” (albeit negatively). The essay is defined by its dialectical obligations, which – being a property of its form – means the essayist cannot even feel his own efforts as the performance of a heroic duty (such as “raising a protest”).

The result is a non-visionary and rather bleak image of modernism that has come to be associated, almost stereotypically, with the figure of Adorno. Peter Sloterdijk, for example, writes of Adorno’s “a priori pain.” We are left with a keen sense of the failure of avant-garde aspirations and a lucid analysis of its ideological delusions, but without any sense at all of a visionary alternative to the object of critique and the situation that is supposed to inspire our protest. In the closing lines of Nadja, André Breton famously declares that “beauty must be convulsive, or it will not be.” Adorno, it often seems, would really prefer the latter option. Adorno’s versions of Benjamin and Nietzsche may be more philosophically responsible, but they may also inspire a nostalgia for earlier efforts and their misguided but nevertheless liberating (and visionary) lack of rigor.

77 Adorno writes elsewhere, in a Kantian vein, that “insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness” (Aesthetic Theory 227).

78 See Karin Bauer (1999) for an extended treatment of the relationship between Nietzsche and Adorno.

79 Adorno’s critique of Benjamin should be read as part of his larger critique of the avant garde anti-art aesthetic (from a modernist vantage point). Adorno is a modernist critic of the avant garde and its various fantasies of unmediated access to the Real as well as the equation of art with life (what Surrealists called “lyric behavior”). Andéras Huysens summarizes this role perfectly:

[I]f the main goal of the historical avant-garde was the reintegration of art into life, a heroic attempt that failed, then Adorno is not a theorist of the avant-garde, but a theorist of modernism. More than that, he is a theorist of a construct ‘modernism’ which has already digested the failure of the historical avant-garde. (in Gibson & Rubin 39)
One thing Adorno does give us in “The Essay as Form,” as we have seen, is a clear and even inspiring profile of an alternative response to the disenchantment of modernity, something like a counter-narrative to Benjamin’s Trauerspiel. It is no accident that the advent of the essay and modern English prose (inspired by the example of Montaigne) should have produced so many oddly experimental treatises on melancholy. (Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy is the most famous, but by no means the first to appear.) One historical reason for the early modern interest in the subject of melancholy was simply the stimulus of Ficino’s ideas as they were introduced into the rest of Europe, where they were adapted and secularized and took many different recognizably modern forms. It is worth emphasizing both the formal aspects and the historical dimension of Adorno’s account of the essay, if only to appreciate why Montaigne’s essays represent a radically different vision of modernity that would draw the notice of Nietzsche and Emerson and so many others in search of something more than a forum for expressing a “mute and objectified protest.” I do think the essay is a good model for thinking about the kind of autonomy that interested modernist artists (i.e., a mode of expression that represents an alternative to epistemic interests of disenchanted modernity). I also think the essay is a good model for thinking about melancholy itself as a site for artistic experimentation, a non-essentialist model requiring no theoretical a priori definition of “melancholy.” In “The Essay as Form,” Adorno makes a strong case for the combined qualities of aesthetic autonomy, experimental discursive play, and an aesthetic abstraction that refuses to equate art with life. But we need a much different concept of the aesthetic as an alternative to philosophical values, as well as a different argument for why we might want aesthetic autonomy – a fully Nietzschean, visionary concept of essay as a mode of value creation, one that does not limit the essay’s function to critique and the registering of contradictions and reminders of our objective unfreedom. Another case can, in fact, be made for the essay and for the aesthetic autonomy of essayism. In the next chapter, we will change course a bit and begin to trace a different proto-modernist trajectory in James and Nietzsche that derives from the example of Montaigne and his model of a rigorous free play that stands in contrast to the Baroque Trauerspiel’s brooding over fragments and ruins.
Chapter Two: Revery as Experimental Writing: The Melancholy Modernism of William James

Our normal waking consciousness is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness.

William James, Varieties of Religious Experience (307-08)

If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity.

William James, Varieties of Religious Experience (31)

If it can be done then why do it?
Gertrude Stein, Lectures in America

I concluded Chapter One on perhaps more of a melodramatic than a melancholy note, with a brief bid to restore something of an historical crisis narrative highlighting what was at stake in these versions of experimental melancholy as well as providing a context that I think is more closely in tune with the way modernists themselves understood their own period-defining moment in history (as well as their keen sense of what that moment demanded of them). The various modernist accounts of Panofsky, Benjamin, Nietzsche and others capture the many facets – philosophical, aesthetic, cultural – of what many modernists viewed as a single historical and cultural phenomenon. It was the historical moment they inherited. Epistemic disenchantment also gives us a context for appreciating a defining aspect of modernism that we perhaps have the hardest time relating to: the rather quaint-sounding idea that art can represent a “live option” for responding to such a broad cultural crisis, and not just register one’s dissent or alienation or a melancholy opting out. It is no surprise that Proust and the Surrealist movement would have been seen as important resources for this project of dealing with the philosophical disenchantment
of modernity (for Adorno, as it was in a different way for Benjamin). Although there is ample evidence that modernist artists as well as early twentieth-century philosophers viewed their historical position in this way, my purpose in this study is not simply to restore the drama of this narrative (or perhaps inject a little melodrama) as a pretext for offering yet another historical account of modernism as a heroic response to a crisis of value that is, in many respects, an earlier manifestation of a crisis we face in our progress-obsessed culture. We have made little progress in taking our response to the myth of progress beyond the level of lucid critique. Modernist artists and philosophers tried to establish new ways of valuing the world, and that is reason enough to pay close attention to their efforts.

The term “live option” is one that I borrow from William James, an almost exact contemporary of Nietzsche; it first appears in “The Will to Believe,” his 1896 essay with a Nietzschean title. To view modernism in this prospective way – as a live option for us, as harboring a revolutionary potential and a promise as yet unrealized – is to adopt a stance that is entirely typical of James and his own brand of forward-looking modernism. There are obvious reasons, and some not so obvious, for including him in this study alongside Nietzsche and Benjamin. James is the author of a key modernist text on melancholy, the “Sick Soul” chapter of Varieties of Religious Experience, a book that is the culmination of James’s lifelong interest in temperamental types and what he called “total reactions upon life.” James’s idiosyncratic approach to melancholy is as important as Freud’s theory and just as radical, in its own way, as Benjamin’s and Nietzsche’s.

In Chapter One, I juxtaposed the image of Benjamin’s “angel of history” with the allegorical figure of Zarathustra as two emblematic modernist versions of Dürer’s iconic image. So what “image” of modernist heroism do we find in James, and how does he fit within that history? Well, we would have to appeal to the image of James himself – a representative of an experimental attitude that champions, in one gesture, the will to make it new, and what is powerless and lies at the margins. And while there are striking similarities in their motives for reconceiving melancholy, and in the almost identical way in which they diagnose the illness they saw within their culture, Nietzsche and James nevertheless envision quite different paths to recovery and project different ideals of heroism. Nietzsche’s ideal of a value-creating

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80 See Roger Foster’s Adorno: The Recovery of Experience for an exceptionally clear recent account of this early twentieth-century philosophical interest in experimental art against the backdrop of Weberian disenchantment.
genius is the Overman, the individual who overcomes his melancholy by transforming it into a source of power. Nietzsche compares his ideal genius, on more than one occasion, to a bird of prey. In *Ecce Homo*, his final experiment in writing the self by means of performative self-erasure, Nietzsche presents himself as an exemplary convalescent, describing himself also as “a destiny” and as “dynamite” in language that is provocative but somehow at the farthest remove from egotism. In James, there is nothing remotely like this dramatic, self-performing rhetoric. James would never have described himself as a “destiny.” If we want to think of James himself as an exemplary heroic figure, then he offers us the image of the affable and “adorable genius,” as Alfred North Whitehead described him; a genius, but one wholly free of predatory instincts. If Nietzsche is the hyperbolic and visionary prophet of modernism, then James is the benevolent patron saint who often seems engaged in a prescient and unconscious effort to set the entire modernist endeavor off on the right foot.

Another reason for placing James in the company of Nietzsche and Benjamin is the fact that James was also born under the sign of Saturn and struggled throughout his life to overcome a melancholy disposition and the threat of a paralyzing despair to which he frequently succumbed. Here is the iconic passage on the epileptic patient from the “Sick Soul” chapter of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, presented as the loosely paraphrased testimony of an unnamed correspondent, which we now know is a disguised account of James’s own personal experience.\(^\text{81}\)

\[\text{Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure.}\]

\(^\text{81}\) For more on evidence for the claim that James was admitted as a patient at McClean Hospital, see Howard Feinstein, *Becoming William James* (306) and Louis Menand’s article “William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient.”
He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. (149-50)

The fact that this is a first-person account of James’s own experience hardly comes as a revelation given what we know about James, who (earlier in the same chapter) explicitly identifies himself with the “Sick Soul” or melancholy temperament. This is one of many passages in James that we might invoke in order to form an image of James as, among other things, the ideally responsive abnormal psychologist. It is the process of “entering into a species of combination” that is modeled here; we are asked to identify not with the patient, but with the observer who witnesses the patient. If there is any explanatory significance to James’s self-identification as a melancholy or “Sick Soul” type, then it must also recognize this power to identify with and “enter into a species of combination” with other possible orientations – an empathy that is achieved, paradoxically, through a certain kind of abstraction and, in the case of the epileptic patient, through a Benjaminian reduction to the non-human and creaturely: “That shape am I.” The passage is one example of what Isabelle Stengers likely meant when she observed that James’s entire career was a “deliberate project of the ‘depsychologization’ of experience in the usual sense of conscious, intentional experience” (Stengers 202 [translation slightly modified]).

The correspondent (who we know is James) goes on to relate how he was sustained during this crisis period with the aid of certain lines of religious text, which he “clings” to as isolated fragments and
repeatable *patterns* of language: “[T]he fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-texts like ‘The eternal God is my refuge,’ etc., ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden,’ etc., ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ etc., I think I should have grown really insane” (151). But the crisis James experienced at this stage in his life (and continued to experience later in life) was more philosophical than theological, as James himself acknowledged.\(^2\) The philosophical problems of his time represented, for James, existential crises in the most personal sense, potential causes of despair. There is a connection between James’s search for what he called a “less objectionable empiricism” and his battle against the nihilistic despair that he saw as the logical result of contemporary naturalism and determinism, what he called the “sadness that lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy” (132). Taking James’s cue that every philosophy is a “total reaction upon life,” we might also say that James’s personal lifelong struggle to convert melancholy into a powerful mode of attention to the fragmentary and the particular has some connection with what Whitehead called James’s lifelong “protest against the dismissal of experience in the interest of system” (a protest in which Benjamin and Nietzsche were also engaged)\(^3\) (Whitehead 3). While this creaturely empathy and identification with the weak and the powerless may tempt us to read James as more akin to Benjamin, perhaps even go so far as to idealize James as the “anti-Nietzsche,” it is more accurate to say that James’s experimental concept of melancholy has the virtue of combining what is most radical in

\(^2\) “I had a crisis ... which was more philosophical than theological.... Why God waits on our cooperation is not to be fathomed—but as a fact of experience I believe it” (*Correspondence* 489).

\(^3\) Here is a well-known expression of this attitude, from a letter James wrote to a friend in 1899:

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man’s pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them on top.—You need take no notice of these ebullitions of spleen, which are probably quite unintelligible to anyone but myself. (The *Letters of William James* vol. 2 90)
Nietzsche’s therapeutic recovery with what is ethically appealing in Benjamin’s quite different recovery project.84

In this chapter, I will try to approach from a different angle the general question I posed in Chapter One, and consider what it might mean to take James and his thinking about melancholy as offering one image of modernism itself as an experimental endeavor. More than any of their contemporaries, James and Nietzsche give us an image of modernism as a heroic response to a crisis of value within their culture, an image that also helps to establish the now-familiar narrative of modernism as a heroic recovery from illness into health. The way James and Nietzsche conceive of melancholy is important, among other reasons, because it allows us to appreciate how their version of that recovery narrative stands apart from the emerging discourse on decadence and the pseudo-science of temperamental and pathological types that defined the period in a different way. (Gertrude Stein and Wittgenstein were among the many enthusiastic readers of Otto Weininger’s notoriously influential Sex and Character.) The way they treat melancholy as a cultural and philosophical concern tells us much about how they stand out from their contemporaries and how they offer significantly different versions of modernist experimentation and of modernism itself as an endeavor. What we also get from them is the clarity of a first-generation diagnosis of problems that give a sense of urgency and world-historical significance to modernism itself. Nietzsche’s aestheticism was a clarion call and something of a confidence booster for artists at the turn of the century who were empowered with a new sense that their art could represent a deep challenge to their culture, and that artists could do something other than occupy a place at its margins where they were locked in a symbiotic relationship with the values they

84 As early as the “Dilemma of Determinism” (1884), James seems to anticipate two different “types” of answers to the challenge of nihilism that correspond in a rather uncanny way to Benjamin’s and Nietzsche’s experimental concepts of melancholy. Here is James’s purely hypothetical account of Nietzsche’s amor fati and embrace of forgetting as a liberation from the past: “The only deterministic escape from pessimism is everywhere to abandon the judgement of regret […] Thus, our deterministic pessimism may become a deterministic optimism at the price of extinguishing our judgments of regret” (Writings, 1879-1898 581).

James, however, rejects this “ostrich-like forgetfulness.” James’s argument against reductive determinism and in defense of a form free will, an argument premised on the idea that we can imagine things having turned out otherwise, sounds more like a Benjaminian ethics of attention that recognizes the “use” of regret: “Its use is to quicken our sense of what the irretrievably lost is. When we think of it as that which might have been (‘the saddest words of tongue or pen’), the quality of its worth speaks to us with a wider sweetness; and, conversely, the dissatisfaction wherewith we think of what seems to have driven it from its natural place gives us the severer pang” (Writings, 1879-1898 581).
opposed. As proto-modernists James and Nietzsche define the mission of modernist art in ways that are historically important for the generation that would follow. Benjamin’s reference to “pragmatic aestheticism” may not be a reference to James or to American pragmatism, but it does refer to an early modernist aestheticism that Nietzsche (and to some extent James) had already developed, an effort to challenge an epistemic culture and locate value in forms of power that are not commensurate with a Will to Truth.

One thing I will not attempt to do is to argue for James’s equal or even comparable significance in terms of historical impact. It is difficult, though not impossible, to conceive of early twentieth-century modernism without Nietzsche. The same cannot be said of James’s impact outside of American modernism. There is, however, a case to be made (and I will try make that case later) for reading James and Nietzsche as refracting lenses for the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was a crucial and formative influence for both. When the time comes to examine that connection more closely, I will be interested less in tracing the influence of Emerson’s thought than in taking note of how James and Nietzsche develop their divergent visions of experimental writing (and their versions of modernism) in response to a challenge that was framed for them by Emerson.

The striking parallels in their philosophical positions, and the surprising fact that their thinking developed independently in response to a common source of influence, do not make the juxtaposed images of James and Nietzsche seem any less odd. In some respects, it is even more unlikely than the pairing of Benjamin and Nietzsche. James we like to think of as the affable iconoclast, the mediating temperament who explores extremes and seeks a middle way, whose role model was not only the radical Emerson but also the sensible moralist John Stuart Mill (a philosopher whom Nietzsche famously ridiculed). Many critics have felt some need to argue for the radical import of James’s thought by placing him in the company of Nietzsche and drawing attention to what they share philosophically, if not stylistically. But there is also the unavoidable fact that even if we do place James in such company, most of the time James simply does not sound as radical. We do not find in James anything like the dramatic and provocative language of Benjamin or Nietzsche: No radical-sounding utterances like Benjamin’s “truth is the death of subjective intention” or Nietzsche’s “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the universe is justified.” Indeed, one reason I have for placing James in close company with Nietzsche (as
well as Benjamin and Freud) is to argue for the world-historical significance of his transformation of melancholy, a significance that he never proclaimed in the melodramatic language we find almost everywhere in Nietzsche. It is not just that James gives us a more “agreeable” version of Nietzsche, free of the hyperbolic excesses and missteps, a kinder and gentler version of the Will to Power. I want to argue that there are fundamental similarities that constitute a shared ground and common point of departure, and try to show that James envisions a viable version of modernism that represents an important alternative to Nietzsche’s. I have to make the case for James’s radical thought, in other words, while noting how he parts company with Nietzsche. And one question I want to begin to address in this chapter is how a shared set of philosophical premises, and similarly conceived approaches to melancholy, can lead to such different visions of experimental writing.

When we move beyond obvious differences in rhetoric to the question of what actually goes on in their writing and how they conceive of the task of writing itself, then we begin to recognize in James evidence of the same generative paradoxes that define the thinking of Nietzsche and Benjamin at its most radical. Consider the epigraphs that appear at the head of this chapter. We do not need to contemplate them very long in order to realize how ambiguous they sound. The language is conditional and subjunctive in mood, giving us literally a “feeling of ‘if.’” James recognizes neurosis as furnishing the conditions for “receptivity.” We do not suspect the existence of these vaguely defined states of consciousness; they emerge only if we apply the “requisite stimulus.” Ambiguity also attaches to the experimental qualities with which we associate James – the call for a “reinstatement of the vague,” for example, and his idealizing of the “ever not quite” might begin to sound like a defense of indecisiveness and a harboring of possibilities over choice and action, a call for vaguely suggestive ideas in place of clearly defined programs for taking action. Even the term “live option” can vaguely imply an idealizing of options recognized only in the interest of keeping them open (not acting on them keeps them alive).

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85 I am referring here, of course, to the famous passage in “The Stream of Consciousness” chapter of Principles of Psychology on “transitive” versus “substantive” states of mind (Writings, 1878-1899 162).
86 The phrase comes from one of James’s last published articles, which appeared under the title: “A Pluralistic Mystic.”
Stein’s well-known quip may come to sound a little more ambiguous when placed alongside these passages quoted from James.\textsuperscript{87}

The same paradoxes reside at the core of Nietzsche’s idealizing of individual heroism, whether he speaks in the first or third person. For two philosophers so closely associated with a will to power and a pragmatic “metaphysics of action,” such passages may sound more like advertisements for passivity. There is also in Nietzsche a deceptively pro-active-sounding, almost formulaic listing of specific qualities identified as \textit{conditions} for something to happen (or, as Nietzsche writes, the \textit{preconditions}):

Order of rank among capacities; distance; the art of dividing without making inimical; mixing up nothing, “reconciling” nothing; a tremendous multiplicity which is nonetheless the opposite of chaos – this has been the precondition, the protracted secret labor and artistic working of my instinct. The magnitude of its \textit{higher protection} was shown in the fact that I have at no time had the remotest idea what was growing within me – that all my abilities one day \textit{leapt forth} suddenly ripe, in their final perfection … No trace of \textit{struggle} can be discovered in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. To want something, to “strive” after something, to have a “goal,” a “wish” in view – I know none of this from experience. \textit{(Basic Writings 710)}

Thus speaks the author of \textit{Zarathustra}, presenting himself in \textit{Ecce Homo} (“Behold the Man”) as an example of the kind of heroic activity he wants us to emulate. But beyond these carefully articulated conditions for action, what is it that we are actually supposed to do? Nietzsche gives us no practical directions to follow. The heroism idealized here reads something like an inversion of Aristotle’s Great

\textsuperscript{87} And Stein’s rhetorical question perhaps \textit{ought} to be read in light of James, and specifically in the original context of the essay in \textit{Lectures in America}, where it appears at the close of a passage describing her dissatisfaction, in her years at Radcliffe College as a psychology student and a student of James, with the scientific approach toward cataloguing temperamental types (137-39). John Ashbery quoted the line in a different context, and gave it a different meaning, in his classic 1957 review of \textit{Stanzas in Meditation} titled “The Impossible”: Donald Sutherland, who has supplied the introduction for this book, has elsewhere quoted Miss Stein as saying, “If it can be done why do it?” \textit{Stanzas in Meditation} is no doubt the most successful of her attempts to do what can’t be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality. And if, on laying the book aside, we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible, we are also left with the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do. (254)
Man: Nietzsche’s hero who sees farther than others by virtue of not having a goal or wish in view. The “I” who writes does not even appear as a grammatical agent. It is his *instinct* that performs all the labor in secret, a labor that is protracted. It is a repertoire of *abilities* that do (or did) the leaping forth, and there is a pre-emptive mixing of the metaphor with “ripeness,” so that we are not tempted to visualize the decisive and goal-directed *action* of a predator leaping toward its prey. “I know none of this from experience” is a running motif throughout Ecce Homo, touching on the Jamesian theme of not suspecting the existence of something as a precondition for one’s uncanny encounter with some new experience. But in other instances, the testimonial claim that “I know none of this from experience” suggests that what has transpired within him is not something he has experienced, but rather an inner transformation that has somehow altered the way in which he experiences the world. Nietzsche’s repeated disavowals thus seem to be part of an effort to establish the *limits* of knowledge gained through personal experience, or at least through one’s personal experience to date. Nor is the desire to transform one’s experience, wanting to transgress the limitations of one’s experience, something we can know *from* experience (or, in James’s terms, it is not something we can know from within the confines of a given state of consciousness, or what Wittgenstein called “the limits of my world”). And then we have the further rhetorical paradox that raises questions about how a reader is supposed to experience this passage as a form of self-help literature, how s/he is to go about following Nietzsche’s example by not wanting to want anything (which would include, presumably, the goal-driven activity of working toward improving oneself). This is experimental writing that consciously thematizes philosophical paradox and converts it into a rhythm, a texture, and a voice. But if we try to read this as a form of self-help writing, then the effect of the language will likely be, at the same time, both liberating and paralyzing. Is ripeness really all? The language has the ring of practical advice, but it speaks to us in riddles. Or we might also say that this writing is meant to work upon the reader like a catalyst, with a purely functional status that will not lend itself to any interpretation or programmatic paraphrase.

These philosophical parallels, combined with the differences in the way their writing sounds and the way it works, suggest that Nietzsche and James take different approaches toward what is fundamentally the same project. I will look later at passages where James sounds a bit more like Nietzsche, and where Nietzsche pursues his project in something like the spirit and even the voice of
James. But as fascinating as these juxtapositions are, even more remarkable given that they developed independently of each other, the real reason for treating James and Nietzsche together is to appreciate how and why their modernist visions of a "heroic melancholy" diverge and lead to two different models of experimental writing.

2. Experimental Writing and the How to Stop Doing Philosophy

As philosophers, Nietzsche and James have a special significance for modernist experimental art that their contemporaries (even Bergson) do not have. What is that significance, and what does it have to do with their role within the history of philosophy? And if they give us a vague but compelling narrative of recovery from illness that is important to modernism, then how far can we press the matter and ask what it is, exactly, that we are recovering from? I want to highlight a key premise that James and Nietzsche share: their desire to overcome traditional philosophy itself, and specifically its preoccupation with the epistemic question of justified belief and appeals to what is directly experienced or to clear and distinct ideas. I want to go further and argue that this significance is brought to the fore most clearly in the historical context of melancholy and the disenchantment of modernity; and that their significance for modernism is that they sought alternatives to these values in aesthetics and thereby gave art a revolutionary aim and a world-historical mission it did not have before. It was philosophers like Nietzsche and James who instilled in the following generation an idea of experimental art as an actual challenge to the dominance of philosophy and the epistemic concerns dominant within Western philosophy. Nietzsche and James usher in a generation of early twentieth century philosophers, as well as artists, who see art as having a mandate and a mission, and as offering a real challenge to epistemic values and who see philosophy as a kind of therapeutic recovery from cultural problems and from the compulsion to do philosophy (as Wittgenstein diagnosed it). Nietzsche is far more explicit (and hyperbolic) than James in his pursuit of this aim, but James also envisions an aesthetic alternative to the epistemic crisis of value.

88 “The real discovery is the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question" (Philosophical Investigations section 133).
What then is the task of this philosophical literature that Nietzsche and James envision, a literature that overcomes and effects a transformation of philosophy itself? Such a literature is charged with the task of doing something in the therapeutic sense; it cannot simply function as a vehicle for elaborating on philosophical themes or for carrying out the usual business of philosophy. It is the writing itself, and not the “ideas,” that must provide the challenge to an idea-dominated culture. This also presents a challenge for us: for while we need to keep in view the philosophical context that determines the stakes, we also need to be able to recognize how they work their way beyond philosophical concerns so that we appreciate what this writing accomplishes (as well as what it fails to accomplish). I will try to show that one thing it does accomplish is the conversion of philosophy into something like a modernist art, and experimental writing into a kind of therapeutic practice.

First, though, we need some context for understanding the desire to overcome philosophy as a pressing need for an entire culture, outside of the narrow discipline of philosophy. So what does it mean to “overcome epistemology”? The desire to stop doing philosophy may be motivated by the desire to “give philosophy peace” (as Wittgenstein put it), but historically it has also been motivated by an impatience and some measure of shame over its inability to move beyond the starting gates of its uncertainty about its own methods, so that philosophy can begin its real work and make some tangible progress on the model of the progressive activity of scientists and artists. Philosophy, almost since its beginning, has sought to overcome the position of critical self-doubt and the basic questions which it has not been able to move beyond. It is somewhat ironic that philosophers, members of a profession that is not so much self-loathing as constantly looking for ways to move beyond the mind-forged manacles of philosophical problems so that they can make some real progress like other disciplines (and get on with the work of philosophy on the progressive model of science!). But that critical work has been self corrosive and self undermining, and overcoming skepticism means turning that “nervousness” about empirically justified knowledge (as James put it) into a method of inquiry – namely, into the progressive activity of empirical science. Paradoxically, one of the most successful attempts to overcome philosophy has also been the movement most responsible for locking epistemological values in place within the culture. Empiricism has long been fueled by a desire to disavow its status as a natural philosophy and
allow itself to become absorbed into the more progressive sciences (the “harder” the science, the better). Scientific empiricism, with its obsessive concern for procedural validity, offers a vivid example of how philosophy has held itself captive by posing questions it cannot answer. Philosophy has spent much of its energy, up until today, trying to break free of its mind-forged manacles, to free itself from an endless cycle of self-doubt.

It should therefore come as no surprise that philosophers are in a special position to give some of the clearest accounts of overcoming epistemology as a context for modernism. In his classic essay “Overcoming Epistemology,” philosopher Charles Taylor gives one of the clearest account of the philosophical effort to abandon and move beyond what Taylor calls “inner-outer” representational thinking (what he labels the “I/O” model), the lingering “mediational” frame, also known as the scheme/reality distinction (2-3). What Taylor gives us is an account of the project of overcoming epistemology as a development that we can locate at a specific historical moment (Taylor does not go so far as to designate it a “modernist philosophy,” even though the four philosophers he mentions are contemporaries). Taylor singles out four early twentieth-century philosophers — Edmund Husserl, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty — who “helped to break the thrall of the mediational picture; they didn’t just deny it; they worked their way out of it; which meant that they articulated it, and showed it to be wrong, to need replacing by another picture” (Taylor does not go so far as to designate it a “modernist philosophy,” even though the four philosophers he mentions are contemporaries). Taylor singles out four early twentieth-century philosophers — Edmund Husserl, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty — who “helped to break the thrall of the mediational picture; they didn’t just deny it; they worked their way out of it; which meant that they articulated it, and showed it to be wrong, to need replacing by another picture” (Merleau-Ponty 31). The language Taylor uses to describe this task of working one’s way out of the paralysis of being held captive by a picture clearly owes a lot to Wittgenstein in particular, and to his conception of philosophy as “showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle.” As I hope to show later, this conception of philosophy as a therapeutic practice (and an experimental art) derives in large part from Wittgenstein’s reading of James’s Varieties of Religious Experience.

Taylor also shows how difficult it is to overcome epistemic values, and how versions of antifoundational thinking (what Nietzsche called “active nihilism”) can still remain fully within the frame of epistemic thinking and retain and reproduce its basic structure. Put another way, skepticism can have a

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89 For a classic account of the psychology of philosophical skepticism from a Wittgensteinian perspective, see the opening chapter of Stanley Cavell’s Claim of Reason.

90 Taylor alludes here to Wittgenstein’s “a picture held us captive” (Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen) (Philosophical Investigations, section 115). Taylor’s Wittgensteinian perspective on the problem is reflected in the title of his essay on Merleau Ponty: “Merleau-Ponty and the Picture of Epistemology.”
co-dependent relationship with the picture it denies and the foundations it rejects. Taylor emphasizes that the epistemological crisis was a crisis of value and a crisis of a culture, not just a problem within the discipline of philosophy. This is particularly important for our understanding of modernism, because for modernists the cultural dominance of epistemic values was represented by nineteenth-century positivism, a radically nihilist form of antifoundational empiricism. And Taylor observes that we have not fully come to terms with the implications of this rejection of epistemology.

Taylor’s claim that these early twentieth-century philosophers overcame epistemology by “work[ing] their way through” invokes the therapeutic language of Wittgenstein, but Taylor is not clear about what kind of “picture” might replace the one that held us captive and what kind of “work” is required (and whether that process of working through comes to an end or must be repeated – whether one is once-born or twice born,” as James might have put it.) Taylor suggests that we need a different account of belief, “another picture” – which may be true, but that does not begin to deal with the cultural problem of locating new values that modernist artists (not to mention Husserl et al) found most pressing. “Worked their way out of it” ... to what? Taylor emphasizes that while we may have new accounts from Merleau-Ponty and others, we still have not found a way to deal with the cultural crisis of value. A new account does not address the problem of locating new values.

One serious limitation of Taylor’s account is that he exemplifies the limitations of a philosophical understanding of what the epistemological project is. In short, Taylor assumes that there are philosophical solutions to philosophical problems. Apart from offering a different account than the I/O mediational model, of how we form our knowledge of the world interactively, Taylor recognizes the more immediate task of dealing with the crisis of value. And he recognizes two possible responses to the question of value that are almost diametrically opposed and may be fundamentally incompatible: the Habermassian option (in which this new account makes clear the need for a new concept of rational discourse); and the Nietzschean option (in which there is a postmodern, Foucauldian “care of self” art as life subjectivism) (“Overcoming” 16-19). Taylor endorses some form of the former, and in the course of doing so he underestimates the significance of Nietzsche. His understanding of Nietzschean aestheticism is a postmodern version of Nietzsche, one of many later versions of Nietzsche, but this one is significant because Taylor’s attribution of a postmodern aestheticism to Nietzsche bears little resemblance to the
modernist Nietzsche.91 Nietzsche and James are in a real sense the fathers of the movement in philosophy that Taylor describes,92 but Taylor does not seem to know what to do with Nietzsche. This is a telling omission, because failing to appreciate Nietzsche comes close to a failure to acknowledge modernist art as an attempt to address the problem Taylor lays out with such clarity. Taylor’s telling failure to appreciate Nietzsche is a failure to appreciate modernist art as a response to a crisis of value—nihilism is about meaning, not about adequate accounts of how we form our knowledge of the world. Nietzsche’s will to power—though it is problematic, and may be impossible to reconcile and make compatible with morality—at least identifies another source of value, however vaguely conceived, as an alternative to the will to truth (which, of course, Nietzsche conceives as a value and one manifestation of that will to power).

The story of modernist writing and the recovery from philosophy is a complicated one, but a range of options were clear long before the aestheticicism of Foucault and the communal rationalism of Habermas. The struggles of James and Nietzsche (which I hope to foreground here) do demonstrate how difficult it is to conceive of aesthetic alternatives to these philosophical values (as Taylor appreciates). A real measure of their impact on modernism (Nietzsche’s, and to some extent James’s as well) is that they gave art a mission it did not have before. What inspired artists was not so much their philosophy, but their notion that art could challenge the values of a culture. This would inspire artists with a sense of the power of art to challenge and reform an entire culture, just as it would inspire later philosophers to try to pursue philosophy in a different way. This need for alternatives was clear to artists who had very little interest in or understanding of the specifics of Nietzsche’s philosophy and who understood the crisis in its cultural and psychological manifestations (rather than as a crisis in philosophy). In a quieter way, then, modernist artists of Wittgenstein’s generation were engaged in the same task of dealing with this crisis of value by other means. And unlike philosophers, these artists were not at all interested in refuting it or in demonstrating that this account was “wrong” or in “replacing it with

91 We have (thankfully) moved beyond the tactic, still popular at the time Taylor wrote “Overcoming Epistemology,” of labeling everything congenial to our interests as “postmodern” with the implication of having overcome a straw-man notion of modernism. Taylor’s conflation of Nietzsche with one of many opportunistic misreadings is a way of dismissing Nietzsche along with what Taylor sees as inadequate and ungenial in Foucault’s postmodern aestheticism.
92 This is a more serious omission than in might seem, even for historical reasons: James had an unappreciated impact on phenomenology through Husserl, in addition to his influence on Wittgenstein. See Goodman, for example.
another picture” or new philosophical account of how we form beliefs. What was more important to these artists was the therapeutic work of philosophy in helping us to get outside the need for pictures at all (Wittgenstein’s method, not Merleau-Ponty’s). The most important philosophers in this respect actually predate Taylor’s twentieth-century generation and in some respects go farther. And James and Nietzsche, as I have already suggested, had a precursor in Emerson, a literary figure whose status as a philosopher is usefully ambiguous.

Stanley Cavell is one contemporary philosopher who recognizes the need to convert philosophy into another kind of activity, what he envisions as a “philosophical poetry,” rather than attempting to revise the mission statement of philosophy and fixing it from within. Cavell’s chief inspiration and model for what he envisions as a “philosophical poetry” (and what he tries to do in his own writing as well) are not poems but the experimental essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Cavell has been largely responsible for the full recognition of Emerson as a major American philosopher. In fact, Cavell’s own career as a philosopher can be understood as a gradual embrace of Emerson, who helps Cavell to work his way through to a new concept of philosophy, a new way of doing philosophy. The problem of the self-defeating, self-perpetuating psychological complex of philosophical skepticism is one that he described so well in The Claim of Reason (1979), the last major work of his analytical “Wittgenstein phase” before he entered what we might call his now four-decade-long Emersonian phase (to which I will turn my attention in Chapter Four). Emerson’s real significance for Cavell is that he gives us a literary example (a way of life by abandonment) that shows Wittgenstein’s fly the way out of the fly bottle of philosophy. Emerson accomplishes this task, on Cavell’s account, not by giving a better account of how we engage the world, but by taking the more radical step of converting philosophy into literature. Cavell’s Emerson is the first anti-philosopher in the modern sense, and an important influence for Nietzsche’s thought.

In his essay “Declining Decline,” it is Cavell who also takes a step that Taylor does not and begins to read Emerson and Wittgenstein within the larger historical discourse on melancholy. Cavell emphasizes that skepticism cannot be refuted; it can only be converted into a method. In Cavell’s reading of Emerson’s “Experience,” melancholy plays a central role in this attempt to convert skepticism into a method. In “Experience,” Cavell writes, Emerson makes the crucial move of abandoning the aim of
refuting skepticism. I will argue in Chapter Five that Nietzsche goes beyond Emerson in important ways to make writing a problem (so that we therefore cannot simply “jump” from Emerson to modernist writing). But Emerson was just as important for Nietzsche as for Cavell, and one endeavor in which Cavell succeeds (beyond gaining recognition of Emerson as a philosopher) is to recognize and take seriously the significance of Emerson for Nietzsche. Cavell understands Nietzsche better than Taylor, at least with respect to the aesthetic challenge of skepticism. Cavell, however, tends to read Nietzsche as merely elaborating on Emersonian ideas that influenced him, ignoring the problem of writing as Nietzsche conceived it. Cavell also fails to recognize where Nietzsche diverges from Emerson, and he generally has little interest in James, the other major heir to Emerson, who writes according to a quite different conception of experimental writing.

Because he speaks of influence rather than a continued effort to deal with problems, Cavell raises questions about the role and function of writing as a way of doing philosophy that he does not fully address. I will read Nietzsche and James as different responses to Emerson, not simply elaborations of his thought, because they give us new models for experimental writing. And that demands that close attention be paid to what the writing itself does, not just as a vehicle for ideas and for carrying out business as usual. To put it simply, philosophical poetry has to make something happen, at least in the therapeutic sense. And it must work to replace the traditional activity of philosophizing, as well as the compulsion to philosophize within the limited frame of epistemic concerns. Any new way of thinking about the function of art and experimental writing must answer the question of what kind of agency and what kind of power we have gained once we escape the “picture that held us captive.” So what is it, according to Cavell, that writing is supposed to do? How do we avoid making writing into another Freudian compulsive activity, a way of filling up time and converting time into the filled space of page after page of writing? Robert Burton’s well-known confession that he “write[s] of melancholy in order to avoid being melancholy” can make writing sound like a compulsive activity done merely for the sake of keeping active, which comes close to the personal and time-honored therapeutic remedy of steady and uninterrupted work.

93 Treating Nietzsche as simply another “disciple” of Emerson also allows him to ignore modernism itself as a phenomenon, which is a common strategy among Emersonian critics – cf. Poirier, The Renewal of Literature.
Cavell’s notion of a “philosophical poetry,” then, is closely connected with the project of converting skepticism into a method. What would this philosophical poetry look like? What would it have to do in order to successfully overcome epistemology? The fundamental question jointly raised by Cavell and Taylor is: How does one convert skepticism into a method in a way that truly overcomes epistemology and also creates new values to replace philosophical values? One challenge we face is that Nietzsche’s ideal of value creation is somewhat at odds with “abandonment” as a programmatic way of life guided by fixed procedural values. We cannot know what these values are ahead of time, as Nietzsche and James both remind us, and the via activa of writing cannot operate within a goal-directed framework (like elegiac mourning) whose goals are determined ahead of time.

Cavell shows that there are many different versions of the role of writing as a means of establishing new values (thereby avoiding programmatic tasks assigned to writing). This is important, because art-as-life aestheticism can become a programmatic, perfectionist kind of writing. Cavell’s Nietzschean moral perfectionism redefines knowledge as self-knowledge: Cavell also writes of Emerson’s “epistemology of moods,” which suggests that it is entirely possible to translate Emerson’s radical thought fully within the frame of epistemic concerns. But what is that knowledge? Cavell’s “moral perfectionism” takes its cue from Emerson’s comment on the “unattained but attainable self” – so that we have moral perfectionism as a project of self discovery through self creation. This conflicts in important ways with Nietzsche’s conception of writing, as we shall see (and we have already seen in the quoted passage from Ecce Homo: “no trace of struggle”).

This model of experimental writing as self-fashioning tends toward a model of self interpretation as articulation that owes as much to Freud as it does to Nietzsche and to Emerson. Here is Cavell on the work of experimental writing as the work of mourning in the Freudian sense:

It has been said that pragmatists wish their writing, like all good writing, to work – that is, to make a difference. […] Freud speaks of mourning as work, something Emerson quite explicitly declares it to be … Does the writing of Dewey or James help us understand this idea of work? (in Dickstein 73)
As this passage indicates, Freud is another model that Cavell openly embraces. Emerson, of course, did not write in terms of mourning versus melancholia, but Cavell can easily translate this way of life by abandonment into a mandate for a repeated process of mourning. There are serious problems with the compatibility of Nietzsche with Freud. For Nietzsche, one of the problems of writing was how to articulate oneself without identifying with any one image of heroism— or, as I will put it in Chapter 5, how to make one’s acts of self-articulation representative without at the same time representing oneself and projecting static images for the heroic self with which one identifies (a corollary of Taylor’s inner/outer representational problem – showing the close connection with epistemic concerns). The work of mourning gives writing something to do, an experimental program to follow. Cavell rightly questions the philosophical interests of pragmatism (in his provocatively titled “What’s the Use in Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?”), but he replaces that with an appeal to Freud’s theory of mourning, which is in many respects a problematic theoretical framework. Cavell does, at least, acknowledge the obvious difference between the voices of James and Emerson (as many pragmatist readings do not), and he asks how the writing itself works, which I think is the right question to ask. I now want to bring that question to bear in a reading of James and Nietzsche, the two most important heirs to the Emersonian project of overcoming epistemology, and pay close attention to how their writing actually works.

3. Nietzsche’s Ascensional Philosophy and the Problem of Getting Out of Bed

Critic Richard Poirier has noted a tension in James’s writing between “his promotions, compounded by self-advertisement, of will and action, and the more insinuated privileges he gives ... to receptivity and to an Emersonian abandonment of acquired selfhood” (Poetry and Pragmatism 42). We have already seen that this observation applies just as well to Nietzsche, and we have already registered the important Emerson connection to which Poirier alludes (much more will be said about Emerson in later chapters). In fact, what Poirier says of James may be a more accurate description of Nietzsche’s experimental project of Selbstgestaltung (“self-fashioning,” or a “giving order to oneself”) with its connection between abandonment as “a way of life” and the project of actively acquiring and passively letting go in the course of fashioning and refashioning new selves.
Let's now look at two passages in which James and Nietzsche deal in different ways with the specific philosophical paradox involving the relationship between active and passive states. Here is an early account of the active/passive paradox in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*:

In *Oedipus at Colonus* we encounter the same cheerfulness, but elevated into an infinite transgression. The old man, struck by an excess of misery, abandoned solely to suffer whatever befalls him, is confronted by the supraterrestrial cheerfulness that descends from the divine sphere and suggests to us that the hero attains his highest activity, extending far beyond his life, through his purely passive posture, while his conscious deeds and desires, earlier in his life, merely led him into passivity. (Portable Nietzsche 59)

The exemplary tragic hero described here in *The Birth of Tragedy* would later become an experiment in the activity of self-articulation – the experiment of *Ecce Homo*, which elaborates on some of these themes that Nietzsche identifies in Greek tragedy. There is a remarkable continuity between the philosophical concerns that inform this passage, taken from Nietzsche’s earliest published work, and the much later and otherwise different-sounding experiment of *Ecce Homo* (the “supraterrestrial cheerfulness that descends from the divine sphere,” for example, anticipates the “magnitude of [a] higher protection” in *Ecce Homo*). This is an example of what Gaston Bachelard called Nietzsche’s “ascensional” philosophy, his heroic ideal of winged melancholy that takes flight by submitting to forces beyond its control: cheerfulness *descends upon* the hero and is *elevated into* an infinite transgression, leading the hero to attain his highest activity. The sublime heroism Nietzsche profiles here complicates the standard passive/active distinction by means of the relatively simple tactic of a dialectical inversion.

The next passage I want to look at comes from the chapter on “The Will” in James’s *Principles of Psychology*, originally published in 1890 as a college textbook, and surely the only major canonical work of American literature to have emerged (to date) from that genre. There are few textbooks about which we might say (as Emerson wrote of Montaigne) that “if you cut these words, they would bleed.” But there
is nothing melodramatic in James’s writing, as this comment might suggest, and the challenge of raising oneself up out of bed in the morning is a world away from Nietzsche’s ascensional philosophy modeled on the sublime intensity of the Greek tragedy:

We know what it is to get out of bed on a freezing morning in a room without a fire, and how the very vital principle within us protests against the ordeal. Probably most persons have lain on certain mornings for an hour at a time unable to brace themselves to the resolve. We think how late we shall be, how the duties of the day will suffer; we say, “I must get up, this is ignominious,” etc.; but still the warm couch feels too delicious, the cold outside too cruel, and resolution faints away and postpones itself again and again just as it seemed on the verge of bursting the resistance and passing over into the decisive act. Now how do we ever get up under such circumstances? If I may generalize from my own experience, we more often than not get up without any struggle or decision at all. We suddenly find that we have got up. A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some revery connected with the day’s life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, “Hello! I must lie here no longer” – an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects. It was our acute consciousness of both the warmth and the cold during the period of struggle, which paralyzed our activity then and kept our idea of rising in the condition of wish and not of will. The moment these inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects. (Writings: 1878-1899 395)

For Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem takes the form “I do not know my way around”; for Emerson, it takes the form of the question “Where do we find ourselves?” For James, author of a science textbook, a scientific problem can take the form: “I do not know how to raise myself out of bed.” James presents for us here is what I cannot resist calling his myth of the eternal rising up from bed. The quotidian nature of this example and the low-key rhetoric should not obscure its deep similarity with Nietzsche or its modeling
of a transvaluation of values (albeit on a small scale). This reflects James’s more general interest in transitional “changes of heart,” and “awakenings of conscience” and that which allows us to escape more generally from situations in which the mind is paralyzed by habitual ways of thinking and rendered passive by certain kinds of activity – and that includes, perhaps especially, active deeds as well as desires. James is interested in the possibility of changing our values and motives. Getting out of bed is a “transvaluation of values”: we change our motives and impulses and pursue different paths that lead us to different goals. These, James observes, may affect the “whole scale of values of our motives and impulses” (Varieties 1140). James, like Nietzsche, is interested in the way revery and new forms of reflection can form a new mode of intentionality and overcome the mind/body problem, and in the most concrete and practical situation imaginable. Revery can thus be a form of willing rather than wishing.

In this familiar scenario, it is our “acute consciousness” of sensations of cold and hot that combine with our acute contemplative awareness of the many possible paths to take and our sense of what ought to be done (our having resolved to do something and our acute consciousness of its needing to be done – what psychologists now call “ironic effects”). The problem is not that we are unable or unwilling to visualize our goals, but that an acute sense of what we ought to do, or what we want to do, that is the impediment to our action. There are plenty of ways, plenty of reasons for pursuing our goal (including a sense of shame); but we are paralyzed by contemplation of these possibilities. And then, “we suddenly find that we have got up.”

There is a subtle interplay here between active verbs and nominalized forms of verbs. When we “brace ourselves to the resolve,” we nominalize “resolve” and locate it as a capacity within ourselves. The effect here, as with Nietzsche, is not to make these verbs abstract concepts, but to regard them as potential energies that we can tap and into find ways of realizing in the course of navigating ourselves through given situations. James does not ask us to submit passively to these forces. The problem is that resolution itself (the noun-object that assumes the role of the grammatical agent) becomes an impediment. The question is not where we get “the resolve”—the grammatical subject is “resolution” (allegorical personification, rather than abstract concept) that “faints away.” But then we enter other modes of grammatical agency besides “resolving” to do something. This is a model of how to overcome melancholy paralysis by transforming resolution into revery – by making passivity the key to achieving a
goal that was not pre-determined by subjective intent. James is less interested in the heuristic question of how to get to where we want to go, as he is in the question of where we find ourselves. We need to be responsive to the requisite stimulus, which is the reflective power of reverie to allow us an escape from paralysis.

Nietzsche likewise distinguishes between the doer and the deed, the thought that does the thinking, the sense of command with which we can identify ourselves as the executor of the order after it has been executed. James’s task here is not to explain retroactively “how we did it” or how we manage to do it (and trick ourselves) on a daily basis, but to offer advice on how to arrive at new motives and values in the course of our actions. The question is not how do we get to where we want to go, but rather where do we find ourselves placed differently? It is a reflective question: in reverie we reflect, rather than contemplate possibilities. So he wants to allow wish to “rise to the condition of will,” which is expressed in a tentatively passive form. The problem is to remove or convert an impediment so as to allow for that flow to occur. But on order for that to happen, we need to convert contemplative paralysis into a reflexive and mobile reverie. Revery is an intermediate mode of intentionality, neither active nor passive.\footnote{I want to highlight and borrow James’s term “revery,” which he employs only once in this passage, in part because it anticipates Gaston Bachelard’s more carefully considered use of the term in his crucial reformulation of Surrealism. (See my earlier note on Bachelard and Nietzsche.)} It is the “postponement” that allows us space for reverie, in which resolution “faints away.”

And James’s task here is not to short-circuit subjective intention and clear the way for affect as “pre-subjective force.” As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it: “The relation between my decisions and my body are, in movement, magic ones” (Phenomenology of Perception 108 [italics added]). The key phrase is in movement – and that includes the movement of reverie and the manner of articulation. We realize new values through a close attention to the way we negotiate and articulate a position. James’s “metaphysics of action” and his “by their fruits not the roots” philosophy (methods of acting over reasons and explanations we can give) can often be read as celebrating action over contemplation, the \textit{via activa} over the \textit{via contemplativa}, bodily agency over conscious thinking: even a “JUST DO IT!” decisionism and metaphysics of action. But that is not the case.

It is important to read the “lapse of consciousness” as not necessarily an unconscious and involuntary action, but a relaxation of the conscious will and means-ends thinking (which is why this
passage is so hard to place modally – the point is not to describe or give advice, but to condense forms of wish into potential energy and enable a discharge of that energy through other channels. Revery is neither sleep nor dream. There are other modes of intentionality that transform our scale of values, motives, impulses. Therefore, this should not be understood as the primacy of bodily affect over conscious contemplation, or some sort of inversion of the mind-body relationship (which is easy to quote … but not nearly as radical as overturning the instrumental relationship itself. “The heart has reasons of its own...” or “The thought does the thinking...” are inversions of disenchanted thinking, but they do not really upset the instrumental relation itself. James wants to call our attention to forms of agency that fall between willing and wishing.

Is this science/philosophy as therapeutic self-help writing? James, after all, did have a lifelong interest in such literature and in what we would now call the “power of positive thinking.” But James’s “advice” on how to get out of bed is the antithesis of what we recognize now (and what we would have recognized then) as self-help, motivational writing. If it is practical recommendation, then what it recommends is the opposite of optimistic “magical thinking” that asks us to visualize and articulate our goals and engage in self-affirmation. Imagine yourself out of bed, and you will make it happen. Indeed, visualizing our intended goal and contemplating the various paths to achieving it and the reasons for doing it, is part of the problem. Our sense of resolve and our keen visualizing of the goal are the obstacles, only intensifying our sense of disengagement from the situation. This is not the power of positive thinking in the sense of wishful thinking. This passage does not explain how something works or offer practical advice, but rather models a way of dealing with a situation, and the way in which the language moves here is part of the way it models new modes of intentionality.

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Before moving on, I want to contrast my reading of the passage above with a quite different account of James’s experimental writing from the philosophical perspective of pragmatist criticism. In doing so, I want to emphasize why it is important to pay close attention to the manner in which this writing models a mode of intentionality (what I call “revery”) that eludes the categories of “active” and “passive” – and, even more importantly, resists any account in terms of philosophical abstractions like “transition.”
Jonathan Levin’s influential study *the Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* exemplifies a general tendency among pragmatist critics to make “transition” itself a vague, but abstract, form of agency. Here are two claims Levin makes for the power of “transition” and specifically for what he calls James’s “metaphorics of transition”:

As a figure for the agency that initiates change, transition is associated not with antecedent or eventual conditions, but rather with the unfolding processes that both suffuse and exceed any given condition. Transition, for Emerson and William James, figures power in its purest form [...] art is an agency of transition because, as Emerson suggests in “The Poet and ‘Art’”, it also challenges familiar forms of perception and understanding and initiates processes that reconstitute them. (67)

A proliferation of passive constructions here replaces agency and intentionality with abstract nouns (producing grammatical forms that are quite different from the *prosopopoeia* of James's “resolution fades”). Art itself somehow functions as an “agency of transition,” rather than offering a space where possible orientations, and new values, might be articulated and discovered through the act of articulation. And “power” is idealized here as an abstract concept – not vague in a suggestive and liminal sense, or envisioned as a alternative source of value, but abstractly posited in the philosophical sense.

For Levin, the values that guide and determine art’s function are already established – and they are epistemic values. “Art” itself somehow challenges “familiar forms of perception and understanding,” only to initiate processes that reconstitute them as new forms of perception and understanding. Process becomes procedure, and art becomes (presumably) the means of realizing these procedural values.95 The ultimate value here seems to be an unending cycle of “challenging and reconstituting” familiar forms of perception and understanding. Levin also makes some substantive claims about process philosophy and the nature of consciousness, a move that is not uncommon in pragmatist philosophical readings and for which there is (of course) some well-known basis in James’s own writings. “Life is not modeled on a thing or a condition,” Levin reminds us, “but rather on a dynamic process. … this means that in transition,

95 In Levin’s readings of James, Stevens, and other (all-American) writers, the role of literature seems to be mainly the elaboration and illustration of philosophical themes.
the individual is always being constituted relationally, as a function of a pluralistic heterogeneity.”

Once again, we encounter a series of passive constructions, the most puzzling one perhaps being the claim that “life is modeled ... on a dynamic process.” Is this a claim about the way the mind works (its “perchings and flights” as James put it) and the way mind analogously (or necessarily) perceives and understands a dynamic and changing world? Or is it a normative statement, a piece of advice on how to model one’s life? In spite of some similar language, this is clearly far from Nietzsche’s ambivalent notion of process philosophy. “Life” for Nietzsche was a provisional ideal, an alternative source of value with which we may actively identify, and not in a metaphysical or vitalist sense. (James’s “Life is in the transitions” is much closer to Nietzsche than to Bergson). That is perhaps why Nietzsche can take “life” as a vague ideal (an elan vital), but still criticize Emerson for being “too in love with life.” Nietzsche sees in “life” an alternative to metaphysical and epistemic values that search for questions about the ultimate reality of things (being or becoming, or whatever). Nietzsche, like James, was seeking new forms of subjective agency, not replacements of agency by appeal to what Emerson called “the method of nature” as a foundation or justification of those values. (Pragmatist appeals to process philosophy often come uncomfortably close to the reductive language of Social Darwinism for which Nietzsche had such contempt). In contrast with all of this abstract philosophizing, we begin to appreciate James’s defense of vagueness and Nietzsche’s intentionally vague and non-conceptual formulations. And we can also appreciate how their subtle experiments in alternative forms of agency succeed in avoiding the true

96 We find similarly phrased accounts in Emersonian criticism in which subjective agency is replaced with talk of the “I” being a function of transitional forces or as being constructed by those forces. In Emerson’s essays,” Sharon Cameron writes, “contradictory propositions (along with the abstracted “I,” constructed at once, as if indiscriminately out of original, vital images and empty enervated ones) are the solvent that dissolves personality” (“Way of Life” 18). There is little indication is given as to why we would want to “dissolve personality,” other than the mandate that we submit to these natural forces on which “life is modeled” and keep ourselves actively occupied in the unending project of remaking ourselves on the model of the dynamic world in which we live.

97 Levin wants to highlight the metaphoric of transition in James’s thought, and emphasize the role that passivity plays within that metaphoric, partly in response to what he sees as a tendency to read James as a stereotypical Gilded Age individualist, whose pluralistic individualism is “couch in the capitalistic metaphors of possessive individualism, [and] masks even as it reproduces American laissez-faire market values, with all their defining structural exclusions.” But of course one feature of a system based on laissez faire values is that subjective agency becomes a function of market forces – that most abstract, and radically disruptive, force of transition (not to mention the ideal solvent for established identities and values).
passivity and sense of powerlessness that results when philosophical abstractions, however motivated by
dynamic processes of change, come to take the place of subjective agency.

The pragmatist appeal to process philosophy inevitably takes an evolutionary turn; the processes
upon which pragmatism models its concept “life,” it turns out, are cultural processes as well as “natural”
one. Taking his cue from John Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics and echoing a number of more recent
critics, Levin emphasizes that aesthetic experience is no different from other kinds of experience and
that art must “be responsive to shifting natural, social, and historical circumstances” so as to “foster a
deepened sense of the ways in which truths, values, and ideals emerge and evolve within the constantly
expanding margin of material and cultural experience” (67). It is difficult to imagine, from a Nietzschean
point of view, how a process aesthetics premised on adaptation and embeddedness within “shifting
natural, social, and historical circumstances” can ever establish values that separate themselves from the
cultural logic to which it is supposed to adapt. This is far too passive for Nietzsche, who wanted art to be
its own force within the world, to create values through artistic articulation, not simply submit to (under the
guise of tapping into) the transitional creative-destructive energies of the life of the marketplace and the
optimistic values which guided it.

Pragmatism, it seems, can function as a critical “solvent” for established values, but it has very
little to say about the source of new values – unless, of course, we take the activities of transgression and
disruption and the motives of adaptation and aversion to conformity as themselves having intrinsic and
given value. Pragmatist criticism illustrates what happens when we “go antifoundational” (as Richard
Rorty puts it) without an alternative model of value creation or at least a means of reflecting on values like
disruption and “unsettling all things” (Emerson’s injunction in his essay “Circles”) that allow us to give form
to our purposive activity and thus avoid the slippage of process into procedure. One procedure that we
might want to reflect on is the process of mourning as a strategy of repeated divestment and re-
investment of libido. I think the juxtaposition with Nietzsche will help us, once again, to make better
sense of James and (in particular) his unique brand of pragmatism.

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98 See, for example, the work of Richard Shusterman.
In one of his many remarks on the primacy of temperament and affective interests in relation to belief, James wrote that any philosophy is "the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it." I think we have not yet fully appreciated the full force of this observation and what this means for any attempt we might make to characterize James's connection to modernist aesthetics. One good reason for reading James alongside Nietzsche is to highlight just how radical their rejection of epistemic values is, even though Nietzsche was far more explicit than James in offering aesthetic practices as a substitute for epistemic values. Nietzsche's concept of a Will to Power was intended (among others things) to challenge the cultural dominance of the will to truth and epistemic values, not to redefine truth in terms of some practical notion of power (as pragmatism does). Nietzsche is the person to place alongside James, because he brings out how James also stands apart from his contemporary philosophers with whom he is more often associated (Bergson, Whitehead, fellow pragmatists).

Because James did entertain various metaphysical hypotheses, there is a tendency with James, to a much greater extent than there is with Nietzsche, to identify him with specific philosophical positions – to speak of James as a radical empiricist, as a pragmatist, as a process philosopher and to make the case for his "radical" thinking on the basis of some philosophy such as "radical empiricism." James's connection to modernism, in other words, is most often read as a philosophical connection. The problem is that there are far too many philosophical avenues for connecting James with modernism, and when James is translated into specific claims and philosophies, he can become all things to all people. The question is complicated by the fact that some of these philosophical "-isms" are ones he helped to popularize and to which he gave a label. The philosophical positions that James is associated with (and with which he associated himself) have invited others to elaborate on them and turn them into systems and claims in ways that James did not. And there is typically a good deal of effort called for in order to make these connections and construct systems, while James himself seems largely content with labels and slogans whose function is more to provoke and to stimulate. The result is not so much special pleading, as elaborations on and precise definitions of what James may have deliberately left vague and undeveloped.
I would like to make a strong counter-claim that any reading of James that equates him with a definition of the universe or a new definition of truth or fact or “pure experience” (including pragmatism or radical empiricism) fails to appreciate what is most radical in his thinking. Although I will continue to insist on its importance, the modernist critique of epistemic values initiated by James and Nietzsche is in some ways too well known and taken too much for granted. It is often said of James and Nietzsche that their most radical contribution to philosophy is their rejection of foundational thinking and Hegel’s well-known declaration that philosophy “aims at knowing what is imperishable, eternal, and absolute.” As George Santayana put it in his neat formulation, pragmatism insists rather that “it’s better to pursue truth than to possess it.” It is important to recognize that the rejection of foundationalism, as Taylor argues, is not the same as a rejection of epistemic values (nor does it necessarily imply aesthetic values, or any one specific notion of the aesthetic, as an alternative). Consider, for example, the failure of pragmatism (and the various accounts of pragmatism) to escape from those values. Henri Bergson, who later described himself as a pragmatist, identifies in science and philosophy “a natural tendency to have truth look backward” (Creative Mind 215). “While for other doctrines a new truth is a discovery,” Bergson wrote, “for pragmatism it is an invention … we invent the truth to utilise reality, as we create mechanical devices to utilize the forces of nature” (215). This sounds almost identical to James when he is engaged in the task of promoting and defending pragmatism as ‘a new way for some old ways of thinking.” But the challenge for Nietzsche and James was not how to make truth “look forward,” but to replace the will to truth with some other value. Pragmatists’ “power is knowledge,” moreover, is not simply an inversion of value; it is not a Nietzschean (or Jamesian) transvaluation of values, unless we define “power” in broader, non-instrumental terms (a path that James takes). What makes Nietzsche and James far more radical than Bergson, and what connects them in a special way with the interests of modernist artists, is their exploration of different concepts of power as they manifest themselves in orientations and articulations that are simply not commensurable with epistemic values. Pragmatism offers a powerful critique of the will to truth and essentialist tendencies, for example, but it does not “work its way beyond” epistemic values (as Charles Taylor puts it). We need to do more than claim the primacy of the will to power or make a reverse claim that “power is knowledge”; we also need to define what kind of “power” we are
talking about. In short, what pragmatism really needs to do, and fails to do, is address epistemic values as a problem and a crisis of value.

James’s qualified and idiosyncratic pragmatism, what I would like to call his *melancholy* pragmatism (if we must speak of pragmatism at all), does take us a step beyond this critique, just as his concept of “power” expands on Nietzsche in important ways. In his late essay “Pragmatism” from 1907, James makes an effort to re-define pragmatism in terms of the power to “identify with the remotest perspectives.” As a self-identified melancholic, James would have been the first to recognize at a deep level that the pragmatist claim that “theories are tools” – the emphasis on the instrumental relationship of the subject to the objects of his world – is the *locus* of melancholy despair, as is vividly illustrated by Dürer’s image depicting a multiplicity of unused tools strewn about. The power of James’s critique is not simply to claim that theories are tools and manifestations of a will to power; the power of James’s critique is to inquire into different forms of power and radical alternatives to theoretical and instrumental relations to the world and to recognize them as forms of life having a reality in the world. This power makes him the only major pragmatist who would truly appreciate Chesterton’s famous comment that “pragmatism is a matter of human needs, and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist.”[^99] The power of James’s melancholy, first of all, is that it recognizes a wider range of human needs and treats orientations as responses to those needs. That is why the most radical example of James’s brand of pragmatism may be found in his study of *religions* as ways of worldmaking. Instead of an object-oriented philosophy of disclosure involving melancholy (much as Heidegger based his ontology of authentic Being on the experience of existential anxiety), James found a way to treat these “remotest perspectives,” what Husserl would later call “lifeworlds,” as the primary and objective given.[^100] This receptivity to possible orientations toward the world, combined with the power to identify with the remotest

[^99]: Here is the rest of Chesterton’s comment, which is less well known: “Extreme pragmatism is just as inhuman as the determinism it so powerfully attacks. The determinist (who, to do him justice, does not pretend to be a human being) makes nonsense of the human sense of actual choice. The pragmatist, who professes to be specially human, makes nonsense of the human sense of actual fact.”

[^100]: One distinguishing feature of James’s pragmatism is that it more clearly anticipates Husserl’s late version of phenomenology, rather than the Heidegger of the tool analysis with its ontological concerns and what Adorno dismissively labeled its “jargon of authenticy.”
and most unconventional of perspectives, distinguishes James’s melancholy pragmatism as a philosophy for “misfits, mystics, and geniuses” (as critic Louis Menand puts it) 101 (372).

What we need now, I think, is not another reading of James as a pragmatist rather than a radical empiricist, or whatever. What we need are some constraints and limitations on our ways of connecting him to the experiments of Stein and other modernist artists – to consider, for example, why we might not want to connect James with any specific philosophy at all. As I suggested earlier, I want to invoke Nietzsche so as to bring into view some parameters and obstacles that will force me to make an indirect connection with a modernism that (like Nietzsche’s) does not depend on any philosophical claim or position. We need, in other words, a clear sense of what is being overcome.

4. James, Nietzsche, and a (Non-)Theory of Melancholy

Our first productive obstacle is to deal with what is conspicuously lacking in James and Nietzsche, and that is any definition or theory of melancholy, or any attempt to explain its psychodynamic origins along the lines of Freud’s theory. If we are looking for a theory, we will not find one. Their concepts of melancholy are experimental to the extent that they are not theoretical concepts. When he wasn’t describing ideas as “inhibitory,” James the pragmatist was fond of saying about concepts generally that it is “by their fruits, not their roots, shall ye know them.” Theorizing and theoretical explanation are instances of what James calls “retrospective” thinking. Nor is there much to be said even for the practical value of theories that try to explain human behavior. You do not overcome melancholy paralysis by explaining it pathologically, James would argue; you do it by converting it into a prospective method, into

101 James publicized the term “pragmatism” partly as personal favor to Pierce, who throughout his life was a prime example of a misfit and an outcast (he was homeless at the time). C.S. Peirce concludes his 1908 paper “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” by complaining generally about what other philosophers had done with pragmatism, and ends with a criticism specifically directed toward James's Will to Believe (it also gives a new perspective on James’s “live option” and to James’s critique of philosophies in terms of temperament):

It seems to me a pity they [pragmatists like James, F.S. Schiller] should allow a philosophy so instinct with life to become infected with seeds of death in such notions as that of the unreality of all ideas of infinity and that of the mutability of truth, and in such confusions of thought as that of active willing (willing to control thought, to doubt, and to weigh reasons) with willing not to exert the will (willing to believe).
a source of power and a new strategy for adapting to one’s world. Scientific and philosophical explanation is always retrospective, as James notes; pragmatist philosophy must become “prospective,” and it must see a future world “with hope” (as he puts it in the 1907 Pragmatism essay). This is not an argument for optimism, but rather an argument for receptivity and for remaining attentive to one’s instincts rather than cultivating attitudes toward the world. In fact, receptivity requires that we break free of attitudes like optimism and pessimism that involve beliefs about the world and align all too comfortably with our preferences and imaginary satisfactions.

Their non-theoretical approach to melancholy, a preference for method over theory that they share with Benjamin, must be understood within the context of their critique of the Will to Truth and the case they make for the primacy of temperament over philosophical system and theoretical explanation. What we do find in their “prospective” accounts of melancholy are frequent reminders of the necessity of melancholy and even its potential power as an orientation, in terms of receptivity: many statements about the necessity of illness and its potential as power and defense of “pathological” states as a source of power. As James notes in the second epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, “the neurotic condition may very well furnish the ideal receptivity...”.

James spends a good deal of time reflecting on the values and psychological strategies that inform various belief systems. He makes a point throughout his career of quoting from the “philosophies” of figures as various as Whitman and Tolstoy, George Fox and William Clifford, treating them all as offering up literary documents. In their independently launched critique of the Will to Truth (or what James called, with deliberate provocation, the “sentiment of rationality”), we see some of the clearest parallels between Nietzsche and James. Nietzsche famously wrote that “The history of thinking is an unwritten biography.” In a different mood, Nietzsche would write, in The Gay Science, that “thoughts are the shadows of our feelings – always darker, emptier and simpler” (203). This is a critical starting point for James as well. “The history of philosophy,” James writes, is “to a great extent, that of a certain clash of human temperaments” (Pragmatism and Other Essays 8). Any particular philosophy is “the expression of a man’s intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it” (Pluralistic Universe 14). The “reactions” are therefore primary, the defining and conceptualizing secondary.
Here are two typical passages from James and Nietzsche on the status of rationally and empirically justified belief:

The greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection: when left to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes. When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such “insufficient evidence”, insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-Christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start. (*Pragmatism and Other Essays* 206)

They [philosophers] all pose as if they had discovered and reached their real opinions through the self-development of a cold, pure, divinely unconcerned dialectic … ; while at bottom it is an assumption, a hunch, indeed, a kind of “inspiration” -- most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract -- that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact. (*Basic Writings* 202)

Both passages read like something between a psychological profile and literary criticism. James’s taxonomy of temperaments is arbitrary and facetious, and his labels and designations – which change many times throughout James’s career – do not claim the status of theoretical categories. Consider, for example, the way James deals with the concept of melancholy itself – calling it many names, and describing it as a temperamental disposition that takes many forms, not as a pathological condition in need of a definition. Even the colorful terms James invents in his typology – “sick soul” type, the “healthy minded” type – are hardly attempts to capture or define the essence of temperamental types. They are almost never used consistently, and are often abandoned for other labels that never designate exactly the same types in any categorical sense. And temperament is central to James’s critique of epistemic values, as it is for Nietzsche. James is fond of playing one “mental temper” off against another and exploring the tensions between them: the “tender-minded” versus the “tough-minded,” the rationalists and idealists
(“intellectualists”) on the one side, and the fatalistic, fact-obsessed empiricists on the other. Philosophical idealism, James observes “will be chosen by a man of one emotional constitution, materialism by another.” Idealism offers a sense of being at one with the universe, while materialists find in idealism “a narrow, closed, sick-room air” and see a universe that is utterly indifferent to human interests has “no respect for our ego.” Let “the tides flow,” the materialist thinks, “even though they flow over us” (Writings 1878-1899 950f).

If we look again at the two passages quoted above, we see that Nietzsche attacks conventional philosophy, its fondness for abstraction and its pretense of having arrived at conclusions by a dialectical process of reasoning. James, in his critique of intellectualism (rationalism, idealism, etc.) sounds much the same. “Defending claims with reasons they have sought after the fact” is one way of characterizing “retrospective thinking.” But James was trained as a scientist and was also critical of the “dogma of empiricism” (as the quote above suggests) and what he saw as perversions of the empiricist desire to maintain a respect for and a receptivity to the facts of the world. The quote above occurs in “The Will to Believe,” the essay in which he coins the term “live option” in defense of the right to hold beliefs without sufficient evidence of an intersubjective nature. James gives a sharp critique of positivism, which was a much more problematic form of epistemic value than idealism or realism (and, outside of philosophy departments, a world-view that had come to dominate late nineteenth-century culture.) In fact, it is significant that positivism appealed at one time or another to philosophers who were seeking to reform and overcome traditional philosophy (Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Nietzsche himself).

This lifelong interest in temperamental types and the way temperament frames individual experience occupies an important place in James’s highly idiosyncratic brand of pragmatism. The problem, from a pragmatic point of view, is that a temperament cannot be equated with a belief or a set of practical interests that “produce” truth according to the pragmatist definition. Beliefs and theories and philosophies may be “deliberately adopted,” based on one’s “emotional constitution,” but a temperamental orientation is not something we can adopt with the same deliberation. Debunking philosophical systems and characterizing theories as tools rather than “solutions to enigmas” was a provocative strategy, an area in which James and Nietzsche could exercise their considerable powers of irony and incisive psychological interpretation. But as a strategy for confronting the values that were the object of their
critique, irony and insight were simply not enough. If we are trapped by temperament, and our view on the world is always filtered through temperament, then how can receptivity be a value at all? What are we supposed to be receptive to? Any descriptive account of a person’s “choice” in terms of temperament risks becoming a deterministic “explanation” of belief in terms of temperament, unless we allow some possibility and some freedom to choose different philosophies. Otherwise, this critique risks devolving into a mode of explanatory debunking. James and Nietzsche are literary equals when they hold up the mirror to the values involved in purportedly value-free endeavors, but their delicious sense of irony only goes so far in addressing the questions raised by their critique.

The critique of philosophical reasoning and foundational thought is just as radical-sounding today as it was a century ago, in part because it raises questions about the procedural basis and the status of both science and philosophy. One important difference between James and Nietzsche is that as a scientist, James is an even sharper critic of positivism. Note that there are two distinct objects of critique in the passages quoted above: empiricism, and what James called “intellectualism” (by which he meant both rationalism and idealism). James aligns himself with empirical science over rationalist and idealist philosophy, but his search for a “less objectionable” empiricism puts him up against a formidable opponent. James does, in fact, sound like Bergson when he is advertising pragmatism as a new form of empiricism. “Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude,” but “in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed’ (Pragmatism and Other Essays 31). Pragmatism shared with other forms of empiricism an “anti-intellectualist tendency” (ibid). So why would particular forms of empiricism be thought of as “objectionable”? Here we have an unusual situation, for in the positivist brand of empiricism James had a formidable opponent. James’s “fear of error is fear of truth” echoes Hegel’s observation (ironically, since James despised Hegel). But positivist fear of truth is also, like pragmatism, a conversion of skepticism into a method and a compelling (if costly) solution to the epistemic crisis. Positivism is already a form of nihilism; it replaces truth not with Nietzsche’s “truthfulness,” but with intersubjective verification procedures and an open-ended series of paradigm-dissolving research projects. As a strategy and as a secular religion, positivism is a total reaction upon life that works. The nineteenth century, after all, was also in some sense the period in which science began to take the place of philosophy. Positivism offered a compelling and radical version
of truthfulness as a substitute for truth. Nietzsche, in fact, had even entertained positivism as a “live option.” Positivism was a much more problematic form of epistemic value than philosophical idealism or realism. The new religion was positivist science, and one of James’s great strengths as a critic was to treat positivist science as a secular religion.102 This is one indication of the power of James’s melancholy pragmatism – that he understands the needs that positivism satisfies as religious in nature.

It is also important to see how James, as a critic of the epistemic values underlying positivist science, fails early on in this task at a transitional period between his two major works. Note that the quoted passage above on empiricists “dogmatizing like infallible popes” occurs in The Will to Believe, which is one of James’s best-known essays. It is a transitional essay, however. As an argument, The Will to Believe is also generally recognized to be a tactical failure in James’s lifelong protest against dogmatic systems of thought. I will consider some of the reasons for this failure in Chapter Three. In positivist empiricism, James came up against a system and a total reaction upon life that was already radically non-foundational and “anti-intellectualist.” And his failure to come up with a strong objection to positivism on empiricist grounds is a major turning point in his career – it leads to Varieties of Religious Experience and to the later Wittgenstein, and to an entirely different concept of modernist aesthetics and radical experimentation (different from Nietzsche’s).

Positivism was an antifoundational attempt to overcome philosophy, a radical version of empiricism as well as a form of what Nietzsche would call “active nihilism.” If James and Nietzsche were to challenge the epistemic values that guided positivism, then they needed some non-epistemic concept of the objective as a challenge to the positivist’s intersubjective verifiability (which replaced the value of objective truth with the value of procedure). And the way to do that was not merely to critique all beliefs as reflections of human interests, but rather make a case for abandoning or demoting the primacy of justified belief as a value. James and Nietzsche both realized that if they wanted to effect a transvaluation of values in their culture, they needed to confront the sharp distinction between objective facts and subjective values, a hallmark of disenchanted thinking, and come up with an aesthetic equivalent to the notion of fact (not truth). As Wallace Stevens put it, there is a need for “a something

102 “Religion, whatever it is, is a man’s total reaction upon life,” James writes in Lecture 1 of Varieties of Religious Experience, “so why not say that any total reaction upon life is a religion?”
‘wholly other’ by which the inexpressive loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched” (237). The major criterion for a religion, as James notes, is whether it has the “sound of reality” (Varieties 151).

Emerson’s concept of mood offered that substitute notion of objectivity, as well as a non-epistemic model of value creation. In Chapter Four, I will look at how that served as a model for both James and Nietzsche. I want to argue that James and Nietzsche can be understood as different responses to this Emersonian model, not simply as elaborations on it. James and Nietzsche derive two very different models of converting melancholy into experimental writing from Emerson. But first, I want to look at James’s independent grappling with the Emersonian problem, at a moment in his thinking when he identifies (or tries to identify) most fully with the not-so-remote perspective of the Nietzsche who celebrates the heroism of the exceptional individual.

5. James on the Will

I am going to look, finally, at an extended passage (or rather, a block of separate passages) in which James’s language sounds quite Nietzschean in its promotions, if not its self-advertisements: the celebrated chapter on “The Will” that brings the massive Principles of Psychology to a somewhat anti-climactic conclusion. The irony is that the place where James sounds most like Nietzsche – where James’s prose comes the closest it would ever come to approximating the agitated brush strokes of late Van Gogh and the ambivalently triumphalist and self-doubting voice that speaks to us in Ecce Homo – should be found at the end of his most important and substantial work as an empirical scientist and the book that remains, for many, his greatest work. At the end of Principles, James expresses his ambivalence about employing scientific “method” in the study of human behavior; at times, he sounds deeply dissatisfied with the book he has just finished. The extended chapter on the will shifts to a new topic that demands a new mode of inquiry, what he calls (in his subtitle) the “ethical importance of the phenomenon of effort.” This concluding chapter is an acknowledged masterpiece of American prose, and it contains some of James’s most rousing and noble language. In Varieties of Religious Experience,

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103 This fragment, collected in Stevens’s Opus Posthumous, was discovered to have been a line copied out from another source, and not Stevens’s own line. It no less interesting for that fact; what is of interest now is why Stevens might have copied out the line and what it meant to him.
James praises Emerson’s ambiguously literary philosophizing, which “quivered on the boundary ... sometimes leaning one way, sometimes the other, to suit the literary rather than the philosophic need” (38). The sentences in which Emerson expressed his “faith,” as James called it, “are as fine as anything in literature.” James’s language has drawn similar praise. But there is also something tentative and transitional in these final pages, a restless and dissatisfied quality to the language, something forced in the rhetoric. As I hope to show, this chapter is also significant in that it anticipates a radical shift in James’s methodology in his later masterpiece, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The chapter on The Will begins with a meditation on the limits of psychology as an empirical science and includes a rather candid expression of James’s doubts about his own attempt at writing psychology as science. At the end of his more than 1,000-page pioneering textbook on psychology as an empirical science, he declares that most of what is worth studying in human psychology cannot be understood or even recognized by the methods of empirical scientific method. Science, James argues, is not capable of dealing with the most practical questions that are most important for understanding human behavior – the question of how much effort of attention is “demanded” by the world itself, which can also be re-phrased as the question of whether there is any objective, non-arbitrary basis in the world for our valuing it and for devoting our effort of attention to one part of it as opposed to any other. Another question that psychology cannot address is the question of whether the world demands or justifies our effort to go on living (to rephrase the title of one of James’s lectures, “Is Life Worth Living?”).

“But whilst eliminating the question about the amount of our efforts as one which psychology will never have a practical call to decide,” James writes, “I must say one word about the extraordinarily intimate and important character which the phenomenon of effort assumes in our own eyes as individual men.” James continues:

> Of course we measure ourselves by many standards. Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our heart and make us feel

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104 James was even more blunt in a letter sent to his publisher after the submission of the final manuscript. James described Principles as “a loathsome, distended, tumefied, bloated, dropical mass, testifying to nothing but two facts: 1st, that there is no such thing as a science of psychology, and 2nd, that W. J. is an incapable” (*The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1926, pp. 393–4)
ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth. Those are, after all, but effects, products, and reflections of the outer world within. But the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we are, and those were but externals which we carry. If the ‘searching of our heart and reins’ be the purpose of this human drama, then what is sought seems to be what effort we can make. (424-25)

We know the world only through our interactions with it, indirectly, through the effort of attention that it demands of us. This is not a pragmatic account of truth as something we “make” in the world, but rather an inquiry into our sense of the world. That includes a sense of the effort itself as something independent of us, “as if it were the substantive thing which we are,” as well as the sense that our purpose in life is to search not for an underlying reality or a touchstone of the real, but rather to reflect on the effort we can make and the world that comes into view through the effort that positions us and establishes a relation of power to the world. James is gradually working toward a careful formulation of a non-epistemic philosophy of “as if,” in which “total reactions upon life” (or “forms of life,” as Wittgenstein called them) take the place of experience itself and form a new “myth of the given.”

After this speculation on the consideration of “effort,” James then identifies two categories of individual, weak versus strong, as measured by the standard of how much effort they are able to make in response to the demands made of them:

He who can make none is but a shadow; he who can make much is a hero. The huge world that girdles us about puts all sorts of questions to us, and tests us in all sorts of ways. Some of the tests we meet by actions that are easy, and some of the questions we answer in articulately formulated words. But the deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and tightening of our heartstrings as we say, "Yes, I will even have it so!" When a dreadful object is presented, or when life as a

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105 the phrase that was made popular by American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars.
whole turns up its dark abysses to our view, then the worthless ones among us lose their hold on the situation altogether, and either escape from its difficulties by averting their attention, or if they cannot do that, collapse into yielding masses of plaintiveness and fear. The effort required for facing and consenting to such objects is beyond their power to make. (425)

Here James seems to be trying out Nietzsche as a “live option,” entertains a version of amor fati that involves not loving or embracing one’s fate and the sublime intensity of tragic limitations, but involves rather the conscious “effort” of giving consent (or non-consent) which is distinct from both “ostrich-like forgetfulness” and the “dumb turning of the will.” The “heroic mind” has this power of saying “yes” to life:

But the heroic mind does differently. To it, too, the objects are sinister and dreadful, unwelcome, incompatible with wished-for things. But it can face them if necessary, without for that losing its hold upon the rest of life. The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can stand this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low. He can still find a zest in it, not by ‘ostrich-like forgetfulness,’ but by pure inward willingness to face the world with those deterrent objects there. And thereby he becomes one of the masters and the lords of life. (425)

Here, I think, is where James comes the closest to idealizing an Overman figure as someone who is exemplary in the sense that he can “stand the universe.” He alludes to Emerson’s “the masters and lords of life” (language that appears in Emerson’s essay “Experience”) and contrasts these strong individuals with “worthless” people who lack the strength to “stand” the universe. That ideal person forms “a part of

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106 It is unlikely that James had actually read Nietzsche at this early date (1890), so of course I am not suggesting that James was consciously mimicking Nietzsche or was even aware of his existence. There is an uncanny dialogue that takes place between James and Nietzsche even in this early years, and I think that is largely due by the fact that they were developing in different directions in response to Emerson.
human destiny” — and note also that this is as close as James comes to the idealizing of exemplary
genius. The fortitude of the strong man becomes an example for us, and “his will becomes our will, and
our life is kindled at his own.” But it sounds like a half-hearted ideal — a possibility, but one that cannot
rise to the condition of a reality for James.

The distinction between the powerful and the weak types of individuals is one that he elaborates
in an earlier section of the chapter, where he describes the “deadbeats, the sentimentalists” whose life is
“one long contradiction between knowledge and action ... No one eats of the tree of knowledge as they
do” (410). But their “moral knowledge,” as James calls it, 107 “never wholly resolves, never gets its voice
out of the minor into the major key, or its speech out of the subjunctive into the imperative mood.”
However, the stirring paean to resolve in the passage quoted above takes place almost entirely in the
subjunctive mood, in the minor key of imagining a mode of heroism that is only one option. The “mighty
words of cheer” that the hero speaks sound like mere words compared to Nietzsche’s tragic hero and his
actions, and it is permeated with the pathos of someone who is trying to cheer himself up. He is trying
out an orientation, as is indicated by the highly qualified language at almost every turn: “what wonder...”
and “the way we view ourselves...” James only entertains this as a possible ideal, but it comes close to a
stirring “promotions of the will” (or, rather a promotion of the “effort” that must be made.)

The “strong,” therefore, are distinguished by their ability to face reality, to give consent to its fact,
rather than convert life’s difficulties into opportunities and thereby avoid acknowledging the hard reality of
what either resists or falls outside our instrumental interests. James adopts a Nietzschean reflective
power as an alternative to truth and positivist fact, but also sees the universe as the world of “deterrent
objects” that call forth our efforts of attention. The “deterrent objects” of the world do not exist merely to
realize the practical power of genius, nor are the difficulties we encounter to be regarded simply a “test”
for us. And perhaps “the only unique and underived contribution we have to make to the world,” as
James notes, is to develop a responsiveness that will make us receptive to those objects and to those
unrealized possibilities that our conscious will to power and will to truth lead us to overlook or marginalize.
It is here that we begin to see once again some affinity between James’s and Benjamin’s concept of
melancholy. James has an empiricist’s respect for the alterity of stubborn fact that Nietzsche does not

107 James employs, as he often does, the more ambiguous sense of the word “moral” current in the late
nineteenth century, with a meaning that is closer to “morale” or “resoluteness.”
The stone motif that Benjamin draws our attention to in Dürer’s etching, signifying a radical alterity and not just a Spartan emblem of hardiness. James suggests that we can replace our sense of reality with a sense of what it demands from us and how we meet that demand: the “test” of life. James thus works toward reconciling receptivity and self-reflexive responsiveness as values: “What wonder that these dumb organs should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things!” We have here a responsiveness to our own sense of power that allows us to be more receptive to “the nature of things.” But before he moves further in this direction, James continues in a Nietzschean vein:

He must be counted with henceforth; he forms a part of human destiny. Neither in the theoretic nor in the practical sphere do we care for, or go for help to, those who have no head for risks, or sense for living on the perilous edge. Our religious life lies more, our practical life lies less, than it used to, on the perilous edge.108 But just as our courage is so often a reflex of another’s courage, so our faith is apt to be, as Mas Müller somewhere says, a faith in some one else’s faith. We draw new life from the heroic example. The prophet has drunk more deeply than anyone of the cup of bitterness, but his countenance is so unshaken and he speaks such mighty words of cheer that his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own.

Thus not only our morality but our religion, so far as the latter is deliberate, depend on the effort which we can make. "Will you or won’t you have it so?" is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical, things. We answer by consents or non-consents and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the amount which we accord of it be the one strictly undervived and original contribution which we make to the world! (425-26)

108 “Our religious life lies more, our practical life lies less, than it used to, on the perilous edge...”: This suggests Nietzsche’s “last man,” but the more generous irony of James’s vision of the modern man suggests a figure more akin to Walter Mitty.
The latter paragraph is a quiet but crucial turning point in James’s thought and career, containing the seeds of the Gifford lectures he would give ten years later (what would become The Varieties of Religious Experience). Note how this calls for a radically reflective alternative to epistemic values that is quieter than Nietzsche’s but every bit as radical. The “self-help” question of how to convert the wishes and fears we harbor into decisive action now becomes also a question of how the effort demanded of us by the world becomes an indirect measure of our contact with reality, how responsiveness to that effort called forth becomes the only means of our knowing the objective world. How do we remain attuned to the “deterrent objects” and heed their demand for our attention without treating them as objects to which we might have unmediated access in the ontological sense? Here James begins to consider another possibility, not just exemplary acts of “courage” but exemplary faiths. What kind of examples do we need? Not just examples of courageous action, but also varieties of religious faith – broadly defined, as ways of forming meaning – as exemplary forms of life.

What I want to focus on here is the exemplary function of the writing itself, apart from its obvious rhetorical eloquence. James seems to be advocating a particular plan for living – a way of life by abandonment, a heed ing of the will that conflates the heeding with the willing – that has a parallel in what appears to be a conflation of the prescriptive and descriptive modes. It asks us to contemplate the possibility of acting this way while actually making us feel as if “his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own.” That hero becomes Emersonian Representative Man, or what Nietzsche will call an exemplary “destiny.” The practice of considering total reactions as possible modes of response, however, actually represents an alternative to idealizing the exemplary “courage” of the heroic individual.

James thus gradually arrives, in awkward and provisional stages, at the formulation of a radically non-epistemic reflective practice as a potentially adequate method of addressing the important questions about human behavior that are beyond the methodological purview of psychology as an empirical science. In The Will, James indicates his own concern for receptivity by way of responsiveness. Our morality and our religion “depend on the effort which we can make” – i.e., they are strategies we adopt for coping with the world. The scientist asks “probing questions” of the world, framing hypotheses, and the objective data that we gather is a response to our own questions. Francis Bacon had argued that
experiments are important for science because they allowed us to “put nature to the question.” Instrumental reason is a method of inquiry, so that we only know nature through the questions we pose. James reverses this empirical relation, as well as the notion of what motivates our inquiry: What is important is how we answer the most probing question that nature puts to us – the question of “Will you or won’t you have it so? -- and we do so with consents or non-consents:

What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the measure of our worth as men! What wonder if the amount which we accord of it were the one strictly underived and original contribution we make to the world! (426)

This language is oddly tenuous, the sense of it falling somewhere between: What wonder that this is our only means of contact... and No wonder we have adopted this strategy as our practical means for dealing with reality. It’s not that we make truth happen through our interests, but how reflecting on our desire for truth as a value (as a form of life) is “reflected” in the effort of attention demanded by, or called forth by, the things of the world. It is the value of attention that is primary, the longing for the thing itself as it is independent of our questions. James’s solution is thus to reflect on our interests rather than simply appeal to the interests already codified in the methods of scientific inquiry where the questions to some extent determine answers and the notion of “objective” presupposes a choice of an object. The test of reality, then, is not the result of active scientific interrogation or of simply trusting our dumb responses as an authentic touchstone of some unmediated access. Rather, James wants us to attend to the kinds of power we gain by virtue of these assents and non-assents, and how the orientations we adopt as “answers” (religions, theories, etc.) function to call our attention to the things of the world.

6. CODA

James himself seems to have recognized the fundamental limitation to the critical idea that beliefs are reflections of temperament and pragmatic interests, as well as the problematic paradoxes that attach
to an exemplary individual heroism of the Nietzschean variety. In place of acts of courage or a will to transgress mandated by an aversion to conformity, James began to consider total reactions upon life as ways of worldmaking. He turned his attention increasingly toward religion as the ultimate form of a total reaction. And he would also broaden the definition of religion to include the secular nihilistic faith of positivism. One measure of the power of James's melancholy pragmatism is that it allowed him to reflect on the human needs to which these secular faiths answered, along with those needs that went unanswered.

One place where James rejects epistemic values in the clearest and most profound way is in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which tends to receive less attention than *Principles of Psychology* in discussions of James and modernist aesthetics. James diverges from Nietzsche and Emerson in his more comprehensive notion of power, and we see this change reflected in his concept of a "total reaction upon life" which makes it first appearance in Lecture 2 of *Varieties*:

Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree every one possesses. This sense of the world's presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" (39)

We can recognize some of the same themes that were addressed in the closing pages of *Principles of Psychology*, but here they are in much sharper focus. This is a much more confident-sounding version of what James was still struggling to articulate a decade earlier. It also indicates a fundamental change in direction. This, I would argue, is the crucial theoretical concept in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, much more important than the better known designations of "healthy-minded" and "sick-souled." And
“total reaction upon life,” while not as catchy or as pithy as it might be, is certainly preferrable to the awkward-sounding term “overbelief” that appears briefly in the final lecture of Varieties (a term he would soon abandon with the same speed as the early term “pragmaticism”). The term “Overbelief” still suggests that James is concerned with the epistemic project of assessing and justifying beliefs. Nevertheless, the link between concepts of “Overman” and “Oversoul” has the incidental virtue of highlighting the point where James breaks from Nietzsche and Emerson in finding his own way beyond epistemic values.

Ruth Anna Putnam once remarked that James “believed in belief.” But this implies an Arnoldian attitude of treating religion as an edifying and “useful fiction.” James does something far more radical in his definition of a total reaction. As the passage above indicates, James actually believes in the complexity of human behavior and in the importance of putting belief (a philosophical concern and value) in its proper place among the wider repertoire of what we bring to bear when we engage with our world. We might notice, finally, James's proposed aesthetic criterion for assessing total reactions: they are not most reliable or truest or most useful answer we have, but the “completest.” This is a vague criterion, but a crucial one, and James has more to say about re-defining Nietzschean “power” in terms of such aesthetic criteria. I will try to show in later chapters that it makes a great difference in that it implies a different image of modernist experimentation, as well as a different model of experimental writing. It gives us aesthetic criteria as well as a new model for experimental writing. We might also take note of a second key allusion, in the span of a decade, to Emerson’s “Experience”: the “lords of life” (alluded to in the chapter on The Will) and now “casual reaction” in Varieties ("our relations with things are casual..."). Unlike moods as a solvent for personality and as things that occur to us, James treats total reactions as relatively stable and objective in a different way as possible orientations with a reality of their own. These reactions, these possible lifeworlds, “appeal” to our temperaments, rather than being determined by them. But they also offer the possibility of a transvaluation of values.

By the time James writes the Varieties of Religious Experience, the emphasis has shifted from an interest in temperamental types – types of individuals – to total reactions as possible orientations. James’s concept of a total reaction thus anticipates what Husserl would later characterize as “life-worlds” and Wittgenstein would call “forms of life” (Lebensstommen) Total reactions have the advantage of being
stable, shareable, in spite of the fact that they are not “articulable” (as Wittgenstein would put it, they can only be shown). James here is no longer interested in classifying temperamental types in the scientific sense, but rather reflecting on possible orientations. What James calls the “sense of the world’s presence” is the “completest answer” we can give to the question about the character of the universe – and it is also, importantly the universe in which we dwell (a characterization of embeddedness which anticipates Heidegger, one of Charles Taylor’s early twentieth-century philosophers who “worked their way beyond” epistemic values.)

But the most important modernist philosopher to continue in this direction was not Heidegger but Ludwig Wittgenstein. And in Varieties, James sets the stage for Wittgenstein when he takes the important step of recognizing that the objectivity of forms of life must be different from the objectivity of science – that the “form of life must be the given,” as Wittgenstein put it. This would be James’s solution to the problem of an objectivity, a “something other,” to replace the disenchanted concept of the object (a move that is analogous to Nietzsche’s criteria of “truthfulness” as a criterion replacing truth). I will argue later that James’s Varieties, as a work of philosophy and a work of literature, anticipates a distinctly modernist tradition of non-epistemic philosophy that aspires to the condition of literature. First, though, I want to look more closely at this challenge of overcoming epistemic values by looking at Freud as a representative of those values and as the author of what is by far the most influential theory of melancholy in the twentieth century.
Chapter Three: Modernism and the Power of Positivist Thinking

_We are not melancholy because we believe in Hell, but we believe in Hell because we are melancholy._

Leslie Stephen

_Far be from me the despair that prejudges the law by a paltry empiricism._

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

Robert Burton defined _melancholia_ nearly four centuries ago as “sadness and fear without a cause,” but that has not stopped philosophers and scientists in their search to explain the causes of a malady that may also be defined as something like a universal response to the human condition or a total reaction upon life. The Greek word _melancholy_ means “black bile,” after all, and the medical theory of the four humors is one of the earliest causal explanations for the condition. This unending (and, in principle, neverending) search for an ultimate explanation should come as no surprise, given that melancholy itself, as philosopher Max Pensky succinctly defines it, “is a discourse about the necessity and impossibility of the discovery and possession of ‘objective’ meaning by the subjective investigator” (_Melancholy Dialectics_ 22). Astrology is another classic example of a pseudo-scientific _causal_ explanation; it is a theoretical fiction, a transparently anthropomorphic projection onto nature that has close affinities (as Benjamin noted) with the activity of allegorical interpretation. Astrology nevertheless takes the recognizably modern form of an explanatory theory – and, of course, many of the early modern astronomers, such as Kepler, were also believers in astrology. Burton and his near-contemporary Thomas Browne (a trained physician) wrote at a transitional pre-Enlightenment moment when modern science and medicine were still in nascent form.\(^\text{110}\) The distinction between melancholy as the spiritual human condition and _melancholia_ in the somatic (and later the pathological) sense is a line that was intentionally and playfully


\(^{110}\) as is well documented in a number of recent studies. See, for example, _The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England_ by Douglas Trevor and _Melancholy Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading the “Anatomy of Melancholy”_ by Mary Ann Lund; and _Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science_ by Claire Preston.
blurred by Robert Burton and other early modern writers on melancholy. And for Montaigne,\textsuperscript{111} as for the early modern humanists who experimented with skepticism as style, Democritus (traditionally known as the “laughing philosopher”) and Heracleitus (known as a misanthrope, a solitary wandered, named by his contemporaries as “the weeping philosopher”) were not regarded as cosmologists or process philosophers or early theorists of melancholy, so much as representatives of possible world-views, temperamental “types” to which James (in an equally playful spirit) would give such labels as “healthy-minded” and “sick-souled.” Burton, indicating his choice of model, jokingly referred to himself as “Democritus Junior.”

The long conceptual history of melancholy also provides a vivid series of cases illustrating James and Nietzsche’s repeated claim (or reminder) that all theories – and particularly those theories that deal with the causes of the infinitely adaptable and irrational realm of human behavior – are, as we might now say, always-already expressions of other interests and are inseparable from idealizations. Indeed, as Aristotle shows, any attempt to explain a phenomenon like the mystery of heroic greatness is nearly impossible to separate from the act of justifying and creating for the public imagination a new way of being heroic and great. Marsilio Ficino’s revival of Aristotle’s concept of heroic melancholy, for example, would bring public attention to an emerging “problem” in England that was popularly known as the “Elizabethan malady,” a problem that had gone unrecognized until it suddenly reached epidemic proportions. \textit{La condition humaine}, it seems, has an inherent and as yet unexplained tendency to take as many forms as a mutating virus. Every historical explanation of melancholy tends to generate another manifestation, another problematic case, that is in need of explanation.

The fragment known as “Problemata 30,” long attributed to Aristotle, occupies a special place in that history, not because it is the \textit{first} speculation – it is far from the first – but because it has a special link with a modern concept melancholy by way of Ficino’s revival of Aristotle in the early Renaissance and what became known as the “great man” theory. The original language of Aristotle’s speculation sounds recognizably modern in the way it poses a question in the form of a research project, a question whose articulation of a “problem” is meant to stimulate and guide future research. “Why is it,” Aristotle asks,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{111} See “Of Democritus and Heraclitus” in the \textit{Essays} edited by Donald Frame.}
that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of a melancholic temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes? 112 (in Radden 55)

This is only a few hundred words shy of what might easily pass today as the abstract of a scientific research paper or précis for a grant proposal. Aristotle wants to explain the correlation between visionary great men and the malady that afflicts such a statistically high number of them. This is a specimen of what James called “retrospective thinking”: Aristotle begins with this observation, which he takes to be a given and well-known fact, about those “who have become eminent.” More than two millennia later, the idea that there may be some link between illness and insight remains a truth universally acknowledged, even to the point of being a cliché. It is also an unanswered question that neuroscientists have begun to “explain,” the more counter-intuitive sounding the better, in light of newer theories and better instruments. The question itself, however, is a faintly absurd and loaded one, and that is probably more transparent to us than it was to Aristotle. We can now see how the question projects an ideal at the same time as it frames and initiates a scientific-sounding, question-guided inquiry. We may also smile to see statesmen (trained lawyers?) placed in the same generic category as philosophers and poets and all of these honest occupations compared to the heroic struggles of Heracles. The lunatic, the lover, and the poet may be of imagination all compact, but they are also bound together in their imaginary identification of themselves as innovative outsiders struggling against the conventions of their culture. 113 In his intrepid and always unpopular pursuit of truth and his battle against the comforting errors of the prevailing wisdom, the modern scientist would soon join the company of these exceptional individuals. The modern scientist is actually put in the awkward position of having to allow for his own status as genius, the person who sees farther than others and is misunderstood, and in distinguishing between what is normal and what is pathological, between melancholia and melancholy, the scientist does not recuse himself as arbiter.

112 In spite of the reference to black bile, it is not clear whether Aristotle was familiar with the Hippocratic theory of humors.
113 This anticipates our own broadly defined concept of revolutionary, creative, innovative and entrepreneurial genius. One example of this broad concept is the January, 2013 TIME magazine special publication, TIME Secrets of Genius: Discovering the Nature of Brilliance, where the images of Steve Jobs, Shakespeare, tennis player Serena Williams, and Albert Einstein appear side by side on the cover.
1. Freud, James, and Woolf: Three Modernist Manifestos on Melancholy

This gives us some historical and cultural context for William James’s lifelong critique of science and its explanatory paradigm that rigs the game in favor of questions that are amenable to research and are phrased and prioritized as questions within that very paradigm. Empiricists are capable “dogmatiz[ing] like infallible popes,” and this is not simply a matter of a temperamental quality correlating with a larger demographic. There is a cause and a reason. The dogma of nineteenth-century positivist empiricism was the malady of James’s time, and (as James noted) its dominant secular religion. James thus sounds “modern” in a different way. As a critic of positivist science, James asks whether a research project paradigm of open-ended questions and problems (such as we find in Aristotle) might become a dogma and a source of blindness. We might contrast Aristotle’s modern-sounding question, a question that defines a research project, with James’s inverted emphasis on how we respond to the questions posed to us by the world. James is one of the first to note the paradox that the more we try to cleanse our knowledge of human interests and biases in the interest of “objectivity,” the more anthropocentric our entire enterprise becomes. James is as keen of a psychologist-critic of modern science as is Nietzsche. Consider the well-known essay “What is an Emotion?” of 1884, an early attempt to develop a “less objectionable” empiricism, and a manifesto-like defense of the “aesthetic sphere of the mind” against the imperialism of reductive science. The wonderfully ironic opening of “What is an Emotion?” is pure James and is worth quoting in its entirety:

The physiologists who, during the past few years, have been so industriously exploring the functions of the brain, have limited their attempts at explanation to its cognitive and volitional performances. Dividing the brain into sensorial and motor centres, they have found their division to be exactly paralleled by the analysis made by empirical psychology, of the perceptive and volitional parts of the mind into their simplest elements.

114 James make some odd, but I think significant, choice of words here: the attempts at explanation are “performances,” not just manifestations, and the “volitional” suggests a rational choice paradigm of the kind he will critique later in “Will to Believe” when he addresses the question of whether believing something can be thought of as a volitional act.
But the *aesthetic* sphere of the mind, its longings, its pleasures and pains, and its emotions, have been so ignored in all these researches that one is tempted to suppose that if either Dr. Ferrier or Dr. Munk were asked for a theory in brain-terms of the latter mental facts, they might both reply, either that they had as yet bestowed no thought upon the subject, or that they had found it so difficult to make distinct hypotheses, that the matter lay for them among the problems of the future, only to be taken up after the simpler ones of the present should have been definitively solved. (188)

James takes the scientific form of a question and spins it around so that it becomes a hypothetical query posed to the scientist: How would *you* respond if asked, *right now*, for a theory to explain X? Although James diagnoses this as a systemic error that defines a given method, we might read this as a simple case of mistaking the map for the terrain: Scientists who posit a distinction tend to find their division “to be exactly paralleled” in what they take to be the independent data. But the larger problem is quite clear. The open-ended procedure that defines and guides our inquiry can come to replace the actual objects under study. In the later essay “The Will to Believe” James writes in a similar vein that “th[e] very law which the logicians [i.e., the empirical scientist’s logic of verification] would impose upon us ... is based on nothing but their natural wish to exclude all elements for which they in their professional quality of logicians can find no use” (204). This is the utility-value logic of instrumental reason, a logic that rigs the game in favor of instrumental control and understands the world only in terms of its amenability to the narrowly defined interests of current research projects. The objectivity of science is one that defines *ahead of time* the choice of objects to study – the objects that are “real” only insofar as they become legible as promising research projects. And in place of Descartes’s reflexive “clear and distinct ideas,” we have the more social activity of constructing “distinct hypotheses.” James is a psychologist as well as a sociologist of science; he is more fundamentally concerned with the question of how industrious activity can come to constitute meaningful projects than he is in the more incidental biases that arise, for example, in corporate or government-financed research.

What James diagnoses as a systemic problem is thus the basis for a systematic procedure. We also see a psychological profile of the “industrious” scientist as one who accepts the impossibility of
possessing objective meaning, the impossibility of knowing things as they really are along with any knowledge of their true causes, but who has the courage to prioritize and tackle all of those problems which are currently amenable to explanation (setting aside other problems for the future). The unquestioning faith in this problem-solving paradigm, its open-ended and future-directed work-ethic that binds a community in a shared endeavor, can be understood as the scientist’s version of the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to postpone for the future those things I cannot currently explain; the focused attention upon those problems I can (currently) address; and the wisdom to know the difference between (and not to confuse) my problem-solving research interests and any dogmatic claims about the way the world really is or the actual underlying causes of any phenomena.” The positivist notion of “progress” is a social and cultural teleology, a procedural complexification calling forth ever-new research and efforts to radically rethink. Positivism makes science a problem-solving activity, a social practice. And it is a very effective way of keeping people busy with the sense that they are part of a shared project.

As I hope to show, James’s critique of this explanatory model and of the epistemic values behind it is far more incisive than his rather vague defense of “aesthetic emotions” as a special category of emotions. It is not that positivist science ignores emotions and what James called our “passional natures”; in fact, positivism depends on means-ends projects that give our purposive drives practical goals to pursue (reason, Hume famously declared, should be the “slave of the passions”). The truly problematic cases are those emotions (like melancholy) that do not fit within the logic of instrumental reason and do not present themselves as opportunities with respect to our problem-solving interests. The primary target of James’s critique in “What is an Emotion?” is not theoretical abstraction per se or philosophical “systems of thought” (against which James’s entire career, Alfred North Whitehead claimed, was one long protest), but rather the abstract and open-ended procedures that are the unspoken faith of the positivist scientist. With its demand for the eternal recurrence of ever new theories to replace old ones, positivist science is anti-system with a vengeance. This, then, is the blindness produced by positivist instrumental reason, the blindness of the Baconian faith in “power as knowledge,” an inversion of Bacon’s scientiae potentia est, the blind activity that forms the basis of a form of a radical antifoundationalism in which pragmatism finds both a parallel effort and a vigorous challenger.
James's subtle irony and colloquial manner, his aversion to Nietzschean hyperbole and his refusal to appeal to a grand metanarrative of disenchantment, makes it easy for us to overlook the historical import of what James is diagnosing here. Max Weber's well-known term the “disenchantment of modernity” is a more dramatically historicized (and more Nietzschean-sounding) version of James’s critique. The “ephemeralization”\(^\text{115}\) of knowledge, the planned obsolescence of all theories, the subjectivizing of all value claims, along with the blind faith in complexification as an open-ended research project – all are hallmarks of the positivist science that Max Weber identified as the culmination of the disenchantment of modernity. In his classic 1919 essay “Science as Vocation,” Weber shows himself an heir to Nietzsche when he characterizes modern science as a nihilistic enterprise defined by a procedure in which every scientific theory must “ask to be surpassed and made obsolete” in a process “that is in principle \textit{ad infinitum}” (in Gerth and Mills 138). Reflections on the value commitments of positivism itself cannot, by definition, take place within a nihilistic framework that dogmatically assumes a sharp division between fact and value and rejects any basis or justification for value. Weber sees this inability to reflect on questions of meaning as a serious problem. “For it is simply not self-evident that something which is subject to such a law \textit{[a procedural law]} is in itself meaningful and rational,” Weber observes. “Why should one do something which in reality never comes to an end and never can?” (ibid) The end toward which all of this blindly self-deconstructing activity tends is the “\textit{Göttterdammerung} of all evaluative perspectives,” including (of course) its own (“Objectivity” 86).

As I have already tried to argue, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this disenchantment narrative as a context for understanding the modernist moment. Here is another well-known account of positivist nihilism in the context of Weberian disenchantment, as articulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, what is perhaps the definitive account of disenchantment:\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{115}\) I borrow the metaphor of “ephemeralization” from R. Buckminster Fuller, who first coined the term. Fuller defined ephemeralization as the ability of technological advancement to do “more and more with less and less until eventually you can do everything with nothing.” It is hard to imagine a more concise expression of the dialectical relationship between the nihilism of instrumental reason and meliorism as it manifests itself in a myth of technological Progress. Fuller, incidentally, owed much of his thinking to Ralph Waldo Emerson and has been called a “jet age Emerson.”

\(^{116}\) I need to signal here a modulation from “disenchanted thinking” to the more culturally and historically specific values indicated by the term “positivist.” The problem, as Adorno understood it, was not reason or enlightenment per se but rather the positivist version of enlightenment as instrumental reason.
Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment by which, with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even the concepts of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic. (7) 

*It is only a belief*, and the processes by which we justify and (inevitably) refute those beliefs are more important than the beliefs themselves, which come and go like our always-provisional theories. Positivism subjects all belief to this suspicion; it is a paranoid and frenetic style of critical thinking become an end in itself. Adorno and Horkheimer characterize enlightenment, the unending battle against darkness of mythic superstition, in psychic terms as a manifestation of mythic fear: enlightenment is “mythic fear radicalized” (11). Elsewhere, Adorno and Horkheimer capture the paradox in their aphoristic claim that “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to myth” (15). Positivism is, above all, a way of dealing with a crisis of value and meaning, a solution that is premised on a vision of a fallen world whose only meaning is the meaning we give to it. The disenchantment of nature is a constitutive act, something that is done to nature and to ourselves as part of nature, a ritual renunciation that must be repeated like the process of mourning but that is still premised on a claim about a certain kind of activity as the ultimate source of meaning. According to Adorno, positivism is the logical and radical outcome of a model of science that was set into motion by Francis Bacon’s founding myth of enlightenment, in which instrumental reason and procedural methods are given a primary role. “The true end, scope, or office of knowledge,” Bacon wrote, “is in effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before, 

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Adorno’s critique of enlightenment was concerned with what Roger Foster calls “the twin errors of irrationalism and positivism.”

Alkis Kontos gives a concise and elegant definition of positivism as a nihilistic form of instrumental reason in his contribution to the 1994 volume *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight of Enlightenment* (Horowitz and Maley, eds.):

The force behind disenchantment is rationality, or, more precisely, rationalization. Rationality, unlike reason, is concerned with means, not ends; it is the human ability to calculate, to effectively reach desired goals. It emanates from purposive practical human activity. It is this-worldly in origin. It has infinite applicability and an extraordinary expansiveness under certain circumstances. Indeed, it can be quite imperial. It transforms what it touches and, finally, it destroys the means-ends nexus. (230)
for the better endowment and help of man’s life.” So there is the value of *new discovery* (understood instrumentally, in terms of technological utility and creative innovation) and *meliorism* (what would manifest itself, in the nineteenth century, as the positivist myth of social progress). This radicalized myth of enlightenment idealizes human-centered methods and procedures, that which is amenable to quantification, that which is useful, and (above all) the open-ended process of inquiry that keeps researchers occupied and industrious. Adorno and Horkheimer also note the parallel between Baconian instrumental reason and the disenchanted works-based Protestantism of Martin Luther, who compared “knowledge that tendeth but to satisfaction” to a “courtesan.”

And as James saw, there is a more specific blindness that derives from the methods of positivist science when they are brought to bear in the study of human behavior. Problems become amenable to research only when they can be formulated in terms of reasons and rational choice type motivations that already match its disenchanted model of instrumental reason (reasons, as opposed to the *causes* of human behavior). Another development in the period in which James wrote was the moment when positivism began to dissolve the myth of causality itself and replace the vague notion of explanation with problem-solving procedures. By this time, the model of positivist science (as formulated by Ernst Mach, for example) had gone some way toward debunking the anthropocentric myth of a projected “cause.”

The conflation of reasons and causes (which James addresses directly in Lecture Two of *Varieties of Religious Experience*) is a signature positivist take on the Aristotelian explanation/justification ambiguity. But in psychology, this conflation means that in place of cause, we have motivational *reasons*. The positivist research project paradigm thus determines the *form* of the questions we are allowed to ask, and it is possible to find them “exactly paralleled.” Positivism in the realm of psychology presupposes a distinction between behavior that may be understood in rational choice terms (or as the passions that drive instrumental projects) and the “aesthetic sphere of the mind” to which everything else gets relegated as arbitrary, subjective, and emotive. Even the early James cannot find a way out of that methodological dualism in his early work on psychology, in the very process of trying to challenge it on the theoretical

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117 In the fragment titled “Valerius Terminus” (reprinted in Vickers).
level. In his adoption of a provisional methodological dualism in *Principles of Psychology*, the early James is to some extent held captive by the "picture" of positivist science.\(^{118}\)

This context may shed some light on the question of why James, in the course of rejecting the reductive tendencies of what he called "medical materialism," respond with the seemingly reductive move of emphasizing how emotions like fear are in fact responses to bodily change and arguing how "our mental life is knit up in our corporeal frame." "What is an Emotion" may be read as a manifesto and a critique, but it is also well-known for proposing a hypothesis – the James-Lange hypothesis – purporting to explain how emotions are "caused." James was an empirical scientist himself, a pioneer in the science of psychology, and we might well ask whether James is calling for a new theory to account for the neglected and marginalized "sphere" of "aesthetic emotions." Note the way James treats these case studies as "data" and evidence, what he would later call "documents humain." Case studies are presented not as illustrations of concepts or as new cases to be explained or classified as pathological – and the way he treats these cases as particulars gives us some reason to think of James's approach as more "literary" than scientific. His culminating example in "What is an Emotion?" is not fear, but *anhedonia*, a term James picks up from his contemporary Theodule Ribot, and which James defines thus in the "Sick Soul" chapter of *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> One can distinguish many kinds of pathological depression. Sometimes it is mere passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement, dejection, lack of taste and zest and spring. Professor Ribot has proposed the name anhedonia to designate this condition. "The state of anhedonia, if I may coin a new word to pair off with analgesia," [Ribot] writes, "has been very little studied, but it exists."

The strategy James adopts as early as "What is an Emotion?" is simply to draw attention to the existence possible forms of experience that elude the "system" of explanatory paradigms. But as I hope show later, James's own way of doing science, based on his presentational approach to *documents humain* as the given, and not his hypothesis, is actually demonstrates an alternative to the science he critiques. And he

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\(^{118}\) See, for example, Chapter 3 of Gerald Myer’s *William James: His Life and Thought*. 
makes a case not for aesthetic emotions as a special realm, but for an aesthetic (or literary) approach to studying the human activities of coping, adapting, and making meaning. In “What is an Emotion?”, James implicitly argues for an aesthetic attention to particulars that is completely different from the conceptual thinking of instrumental reason. What is demonstrated in James’s documentary approach, and what his close reader (and sympathetic critic) Ludwig Wittgenstein makes far more explicit, is the power of the mode of description rather than explanation, simply a new kind of attention to particular cases and to the manner by which states manifest themselves. This makes psychology necessarily descriptive, not illustrative of larger concepts or explanatory theories. I will try to show that what is most “literary” in James is not to be found his style of polemical argument, but rather in his manner of dealing with these documents humain as articulations of “lifeworlds,” rather than as texts with a meaning to interpret or as symptomatic of some underlying diagnostic complex. What is important is how James treats this case as establishing a new and valid form of experience, not the way in which he employs it as an illustration or treats at as a problem to solve or account for theoretically.

In this chapter, I want to consider James’s concept of melancholy alongside the much better-known early theory of melancholia, the one Freud elaborated in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” As a work of scientific literature, Freud’s essay is a striking contrast to James’s chapter on the “Sick Soul.” In addition to offering an alternative and vaguely “agreeable” image of modernism, James can seem to represent a specific theoretical alternative to Freud’s psychoanalysis (as Sylvan Tomkins invoked James as an exemplar, and a foil, in the course of developing his explicitly non-Freudian concept of affect). I do not want to focus on theoretical differences here, in part because I do not think James developed a theory or an alternative account at all. Melancholy nevertheless occupied a special place in the thinking of Freud, as it did for James. But the differences between their understanding of the research methods and aims of psychology itself offer an interesting contrast. James showed that our needs, desires, and hopes underlie our beliefs; Freud the theoretical scientist attempted to explain those desires, hopes, and desires as having a logic of their own and a hidden meaning to

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119 James and Freud did meet briefly in 1909 at a psychiatric convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, shortly before James’s death. In one of his few recorded comments on Freud, James expresses some reservations about what he saw as the “dogmatic tendencies” of psychoanalysis.
interpret. While James was rejecting the idea that psychology could be a science at all, Freud was beginning his career-long struggle to establish psychoanalysis as a respectable science. “On Transience” documents one stage in that struggle, and it is Freud’s articulation of his faith in the procedures of positivist science that I will try top read from a Jamesian perspective. I want to suggest that “On Transience” is, among other things, an advertisement for the kind of positivist scientist that James criticized in “The Will to Believe” and elsewhere.

Freud wrote three related meditations on general themes relating to loss in 1915, all of them in some way personal and two of them written in the genre of the personal essay. In addition to the well-known “Mourning and Melancholia” (published in 1917 but written in 1915), there is the brief essay “On Transience,” and the relatively obscure but lengthy essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death.” All three pieces elaborate on the basic theory that Freud had begun to develop years earlier in unpublished manuscripts as early as 1895. “On Transience,” the essay I will focus on here, was a commissioned piece that appeared as part of a collection of commemorative and patriotic essays on Goethe bringing together various reflections on the future of European culture at a time when that culture was in the process of destroying itself. Freud was therefore addressing a much wider audience than in “Mourning and Melancholia”, not only the layperson but humanists and scientists, a group of gathered professionals from both sides of the aisle. Because it was a commissioned piece with an explicit purpose, “On Transience” also addresses some larger questions in its unusual combination of topical specificity (the response to World War I) and philosophical meditations (on attitudes toward loss). In “On Transience,” Freud responds to the urgent “questions” of the day: Is there something fundamentally wrong with the values of a culture that tends to self destruction? If this culture is in the process of annihilating itself, then how do we pick up the pieces and move on? Which pieces do we pick up?

The essay itself is belles-lettres in genre and adopts familiar literary conventions. Freud builds his argument around an anecdote that unfolds against the backdrop of a pastoral setting, and he frames the dialogue in a way that is reminiscent of the eclogue. Freud recalls an afternoon just before the war when he went for a walk through a “smiling countryside” in the company of “a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet” (305). The already famous poet is almost certainly Rainer Maria Rilke, with whom Freud was well acquainted. The identity of the “taciturn friend,” also unnamed, is probably the philosopher
Lou Andreas Salomé, who had been romantically involved with both Freud and Rilke (and, decades earlier, Nietzsche felt an unrequited love for her). Freud notes how artists apprehend and value objects through the imagined idea of their loss. He reports that while on their walk together, his poet friend (Rilke) had confessed that he was unable to enjoy the scene because he could not help but think of its future loss and that all of this beauty was “fated to extinction.” The anecdotal scene thus serves as an important dramatic frame for Freud’s argument, which involves a staging of two different responses to the “proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect” (305).

Part of the polemical aim of “On Transience” is to argue simultaneously for the wider cultural value of the method of science and for what James might have described as the scientist’s “healthy-minded” attitude toward the fact (or what Freud sometimes calls the “idea”) of transience as one of the redeeming values of a self-destructing Western culture, as one part of that culture worth preserving. The essay is addressed to a wide audience, offering encouragement to those who were deeply invested (both professionally and spiritually) in the values of the civilization that was now destroying itself. In “On Transience,” we see Freud trying to defend the power of a healthy-minded scientific view of transience as opposed to the artist’s (the artist here being Rilke) – in effect, an argument for seeing the failure of a set of cultural values as an opportunity for carrying on those same nihilistic values. In offering a demonstration of the scientific values for which Freud argues, “On Transience” is far more than symptomatic of those values. These are values Freud is explicitly trying to advertise. And he presents his own developing theory of melancholy as a case study in how a scientific theory (his own) gets developed and revised on its path to inevitable abandonment. His pathological distinction between mourning and melancholia, and his foregrounding of the tentativeness of the theory and unresolved problems and questions, are thus closely intertwined with the “healthy” attitude he is advertising.

So why give “On Transience,” a slight three-page essay, such close attention compared with the more historically and theoretically significant “Mourning and Melancholia”? Why does a commissioned piece, a piece intended for a specific audience and written in response to a specific moment of historical crisis, merit so much attention apart from its personal and biographical significance for Freud? Matthew Von Unwerth’s 300-page monograph is entirely devoted to this three-page essay, and Stanley Cavell has
gone so far as to suggest that “On Transience” is an even more important document than “Mourning and Melancholia” in terms of its philosophical and experimental implications (“Finding as Founding” 116).

Perhaps the first thing to note is that Freud sounds remarkably optimistic in “On Transience,” an essay written at a time in history and at a moment in his personal life when he had every reason to despair. Freud’s two sons were fighting in the war; the future of the stable Hapsburg Empire was unclear; he had no patients and little source of income; and psychoanalysis, his livelihood and claim to fame, had a far from secure status as a science and a respectable discipline. We might expect to see evidence of this personal despair and insecurity, either on the surface or barely beneath the surface. But we can say with some confidence that there is no contradiction or subtext to interpret in the psychoanalytical sense: Freud sincerely believed in the scientific attitude and approach as the healthier response to the cultural crisis.

We can easily give a Weberian account of the obsolescence of Freud’s own theory, and the unusual place occupied by Freud’s theory in the history of the concept of melancholy. It is both a watershed moment, a revolution within the history of the concept of melancholy, as well as the moment when the concept would be replaced (or displaced) by a more medicalized and scientific notion of clinical depression. Freud’s theory thus stands as the culmination of a long tradition of thought, as well marking the end of that tradition. 120 This fact of obsolescence is actually an important part of Freud’s own concept of melancholy versus mourning, and the model of science within which he theorizes the distinction. There is something else more clearly on display in “On Transience” as a rhetorical performance and a bid for the recognition of psychoanalysis. In order for Freud to argue for the scientific status of psychoanalysis, he must (to borrow Weber’s language) show that its achievements “ask to be surpassed and made obsolete.” “On Transience” represents, among other things, a tactical move in Freud’s ( ironic) bid to win recognition for psychoanalysis as a science (which involved identifying with the scientist as a more radical version of artistic genius). 121 “On Transience” thus tells us as much about Freud’s more general concept of science as it does about his scientific concept of melancholy. And that concept of science involves a nihilistic embrace of its own obsolescence.

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120 See Jennifer Raden (24) on Kraepelin’s influential textbook, and its reduction of melancholia to depression in its 1913 edition – in effect, making melancholia an obsolete concept.
121 For an historical account of Freud’s effort to fashion psychoanalysis as a science, see Sander Gilman The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the Fin de Siècle.
“On Transience” goes beyond Freud’s well-known invocation of art to illustrate theoretical ideas to tell us more about Freud’s concept of the function of art as a separate and autonomous realm. “On Transience” stages a version of what C.P. Snow would later call the “Two Cultures” debate. “On Transience” thus sheds some important light on Freud’s strange attitude toward art vis a vis science (the scientific approach toward “aesthetic emotions” and the more general contrast between art and science). There is the odd situation, long noted, of Freud’s ambivalent and reluctant appeal to literature in the development of his theories. Freud characterizes artists such as Dostoevsky and Sophocles (and literary philosophers like Nietzsche) as identifying areas of the unconscious that Freud and other scientists would pursue as research questions. A scientific hypothesis is an inspired guess, and gift of the muse, and there is likewise no telling where a fruitful scientific research project might originate. But Freud also maintained an ongoing ambivalence toward artists, at one point dismissing artists as “daydreamers.” Freud once wrote to his wife that “there is a general enmity between artists and those engaged in the details of scientific work.” In “On Transience,” this ambivalence finds expression in a polemical form: he is talking about the cultural value of art, not just the serendipitous value of artists, like Dostoevsky, who discover territories that the psychologist would map out in more detail and who thus complement the work of the scientist.

I have already noted some the reasons for treating “On Transience” as a work of literature. Matthew von Unwerth (in his 2004 book, *Freud’s Requiem*) is among the latest of critics to suggest that the walk recounted in the essay did not happen. And so it is fiction on one level (in the sense that it is not an accurate account of what actually happened) and it is literary in the sense of projecting ideals. “On Transience” is thus typical of Freud’s other famous case studies: they are accounts of real conversations mixed up with fantasies and speculations. But apart from its obvious bellettristic genre, “On Transience” itself asks to be read as a work of literature in another sense. More than an argument in favor of the scientific view of the poetic passing away of all things, Freud tries to make a case for the scientific imagination of disaster in contrast to the poet’s imaginative response. Science, in effect, makes pastoral poetry obsolete. Freud’s essay is literary in the way it projects and tests out ideals by poetic and rhetorical means, in much the same way Matthew Arnold does in poems such as “To Marguerite” (which is easy to

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122 For Freud’s ambivalence toward the arts, see for example Hugh Haughton’s introduction to the *Penguin Classics* edition of Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny.”
read as a typically Victorian illustration of the self-deluding projections of the Lacanian imaginary). As a literary performance, “On Transience” stages a bid for recognition that follows a rhetorically similar strategy that we find in an Arnold poem. It can thus take its place alongside the poems of Arnold as a virtual textbook case illustrating the cultural values that were the target of modernists generally, as I will try to show in my reading of Virginia Woolf later in the chapter.

With their genuinely compelling (if logically dubious) moral arguments, Freud and William Clifford (James’s polemical opponent, and an earlier advocate for the values Freud aligned himself with) went some way toward setting the terms of the problem to which James and Nietzsche had to respond. Nietzsche recognized the full extent of the problem first and most clearly, James more gradually. If we are going to understand modernism, then we need to appreciate how it challenged dominant epistemic values and gave art a central place in the response to cultural crisis that Freud argued science is better position to address. But positivism, Freud’s proposed solution, appeared to many modernists to be an intensified form of the problem. I have already looked at one such counter-strategy in “What is an Emotion?”, which involves the problematic strategy of defending “aesthetic emotions” as a separate realm. Later in this chapter, I will look later at the more overtly polemical “Will to Believe,” which addresses some of the issues more directly but is in some respects an even more problematic response.

One contemporary symptom of the dilemma facing James may be found in psychologist Wilhelm Wundt’s early response to Principles of Psychology. Wundt praised James’s text as “literature” -- “it is beautiful,” but it is “not science.” This is the kind of assessment we would expect from a culture that offers up a limited choice between being “a technician or a dreamer,” as Adorno phrases the dilemma in his “Essay as Form,” a culture in which there is a sharp dividing line between imaginative literature that expresses a view of the world as colored by subjective feeling, and the heroic endeavor of experimental science engaged in the perpetual project of revising or revolutionizing our understanding of the objective world (152). As we have seen, James had deep reservations about whether psychology could have the status of a science. But he would also have rejected any characterization of his own work as “literary” in the sense that Wundt probably meant.

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123 See, for example, Charles Altieri’s reading in The Particulars of Rapture or Carol Christ’s earlier study.
What is at stake here are the possible strategies available to us allowing us to argue for alternatives – any alternatives – to the dominance of epistemic values, whose strategy is to relegate anything that does not conform to its values to the realm of the subjective, the beautiful, the merely literary. This represents a challenge within a disenchanted context, because we need to argue for the autonomy of art from those interests, but at the same time conceive of it as a challenge to those values. It is therefore somewhat strange that Freudian psychoanalysis and Freud’s theoretical concept of melancholy should be among our only resources for resisting what we see as problematic tendencies in disenchanted culture. Today, the distinction between mourning and melancholia survives chiefly in the humanities; in psychology, melancholy has been more or less replaced by the concept of clinical depression. Melancholy today has become something of a “junk” concept, from a scientific point of view, sharing the fate of the once-popular concept of hysteria. Like hysteria, the term “melancholy” has been absorbed in the vernacular and now circulates as a cliché; it is “fossil science,” to adapt Emerson’s term. In retrospect, it is quite easy to criticize Freud’s scientific claims and to identify the personal and cultural biases informing his “objective” research; but it is not so easy to critique the model of theorizing and explanation that remains in place as the framework for our own thinking. There is thus something ironic in the insistence of certain critics in the humanities (Julia Kristeva, for example, or Richard Wollheim) who seek to defend and preserve a Freudian perspective on melancholy and various other disorders as a resistance to cognitivism (an explanatory paradigm) and the reductive medicalization of psychiatric conditions. We might contrast Richard Wollheim’s stated project of “re-psychologizing the emotions” along Freudian lines, in response to the dominance of the cognitivist paradigm in psychology, with Isabelle Stengers’ comment that James wanted to “depsychologize experience.” How can we reconcile these two projects? The answer, I think, is that they cannot be reconciled.

This chapter will review some different attempts to establish an outsider status that challenge disenchanted values – and this assumes, as Nietzsche did, that nihilism is here to stay and that we cannot go back and “re-enchant” nature by appealing to older myths or by rebuilding on new foundational absolutes. I want to look at why these polemical strategies (including James’s early attempt to show how certain emotions elude scientific explanation) do not succeed in the necessary task of establishing new

124 “Language is fossil poetry,” as Emerson puts it in his essay “The Poet.”
values that fundamentally challenge the values of positivist science itself and its power to marginalize and compartmentalize certain forms of experience, just as Wundt consigned James’s writing to the expressive and subjective realm of the merely literary.

2. “On Transience”: Freud and the Two Cultures

The first thing to note about Freud’s essay on ways of responding to loss is that it bears the peculiar title “On Transience” – not “On Loss” or “On Ways of Dealing with Loss.” As a companion piece to “mourning and Melancholia,” “On Transience” raises more questions than it answers. The shorter piece both undermines and complicates the theory-in-the-works. But this seems to be Freud’s intent. His own self-conscious efforts to problematize a tentative theory serve the purpose of advertising the scientific method and attitude whose superiority he wants to demonstrate. The theoretical challenges that get foregrounded sometimes exhibit misconceptions and confusions that are more fundamental than Freud seems to realize. Freud makes some oddly arbitrary distinctions and at the same time ignores and fails to make some rather obvious distinctions. Because the raison d’être of the commissioned essay is to give general readers cause for hope in a time of upheaval (and specifically, to offer a vision of renewed faith in the culture that produced this catastrophe), Freud must take seriously his broad definition of the range of objects we may lose and whose loss we may be called upon to mourn. “Mourning and Melancholia” states that melancholy can be a response to the loss of a person, an object, or an idea. “On Transience” deals more specifically with the pain of saying “farewell to an idea” – namely, the loss of faith in Western culture and its ideals. And there is one ideal that Freud wants to retain from Western culture: the ideal of the Enlightenment scientist’s healthy response to the disenchantment of nature, to the idea of transience as the fundamental “fact” (or idea, as Freud ambiguously puts it elsewhere) on which positivist science is based. Freud hopes that we can take the scientist’s view of transience as our model for responding to the war, viewing it as a reminder and an opportunity to rebuild and to move forward with an even firmer resolve. And after that process of mourning is over, he confidently assures his readers, it “will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that the war has destroyed.” So the crisis of disillusionment for Freud is not a
refutation of the values of Enlightenment culture; it is a call for us to rebuild “on firmer ground.” Freud has a polemical antagonist, however, with a different and competing model for dealing with loss and rebuilding for the future. It is the artist.

One of the more interesting features of “On Transience” is that Freud’s conflation of loss with lack (a view of transience more generally) explicitly complicates and challenges the theory he develops in “Mourning and Melancholia.” The scientific opposition between mourning/melancholia along with his advertisement of the methods and ideals behind the scientific approach to transience becomes a distinction between two orientations (or total reactions upon life), not pathological in nature. But he continues, nevertheless, to “diagnose” the poet’s attitude in the very terms he is trying to defend. Freud had acknowledged the puzzle of pre-emptive mourning. There is little basis, one might suppose, for distinguishing between mourning and melancholia if neither is a response to a determinate loss. “On Transience” is interesting in part because it shows how Freud is forced to make some crucial equivocations in the process of expanding his notion of loss to include the idea of transience. I want to look more closely at some of these confluences and equivocations. Instead of examining the psychology underlying this conflation of natural and man-made loss, Freud himself proceeds to commit something like this category error of conflating “natural” transience and specifically man-made catastrophes and losses such as the war. The conflation of natural and man made, but more importantly the conflation of pathology with a world view – what Wittgenstein would call conceptual and factual claims, or criteria for meaning and what are taken to be symptoms – is a key strategic move for Freud. This allows him to devote his energies to the task of staging science and its pursuit of truth as a form of heroic melancholy that is preferrable to the poet’s regressive melancholy.

Once Freud has established this broadened definition, he goes on to note two possible responses to these very different kinds of “fact”: “The proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect,” Freud notes, “gives rise to two different impulses in the mind: one leads to the aching despondency felt by the young poet, while the other leads to rebellion against the fact asserted” (305). Here is how Freud renders of the voice of protest against this fact:
No! it is impossible that all this loveliness of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside, will really fade away into nothing. It would be too senseless and too presumptuous to believe it. Somehow or other this loveliness must be able to persist and to escape all the powers of destruction. (305)

But such a demand for immortality, Freud cautions us, is merely a product of our wishes; “what is painful may none the less be true.” And so Freud responds to this young poet by offering a third possible response to the painful truth of extinction. Freud confesses that he could not argue with the claim that all things must pass, including what is beautiful and perfect. That is an established truth. But he does take issue with the pessimistic poet’s view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss of its worth. And this leads us to a third view, with which he identifies and for which he wants to argue: that of the scientist.

Freud’s attempt to understand responses to the war and what Pound called a “botched civilization” (the “thousand books” for which a “myriad” had already died by the summer of 1915) also places the war in a narrative that is at odds with the way it was understood by modernists (poets included). We soon realize that the war is merely the occasion for more general reflections on the nature of loss – hence, the appropriateness of the pastoral eclogue framing Freud. “On Transience” is an occasional piece, and the occasion is the war. The conversation took place prior to the war; Freud is now writing from a later perspective, in 1915. This allows Freud to equivocate somewhat. He criticizes Rilke for seeing the present in the light of future loss, for mourning prematurely in anticipation of the actual loss of the war. But that is more or less what Freud himself will go on to do, though with a different motivation. If Freud wants to understand melancholy as a response to loss, and to understand the scientist’s versus the artist’s response to this loss of an abstract idea, then he fails to explain what it was that modernist artists (and even Nietzsche, a inspiration for Freud as he was for Weber) were responding to before the loss of the war. For Freud, the catastrophe of the war gives the cultural crisis an “object-cause” (or allows us to project a cause, as Lacan would put it). The occasion for this reminiscence, Freud tells us, is that the conversation took place the summer before the war – which “robbed the world of its beauty” and “tarnished the lofty impartiality of science.” It also showed us the ephemerality of those things that were
regarded as changeless. According to Freud, the poet’s mourning of loss prior to that loss (in the war) is pathological. And so Freud argues that there are two responses to the traumatic losses of the war, but only after the cause has been located and a narrative established. By Freud’s logic, Rilke and the large number of modernist writers who were responding before 1914 to what they saw as a crisis in their culture (and that includes Nietzsche, not to mention the presciently elegiac pre-war poetry of A.E. Housman and Thomas Hardy) were technically in “premature mourning.” This is not, however, the line that Freud takes – the notion of a “sadness without cause” being, after all, a problem which scientists (and psychoanalysis as a science) are still working hard to solve. Freud criticizes the artist for the “cheating” strategy of conflating loss and absence, of anticipatory mourning. But we soon witness Freud the scientist doing the same thing. He views objects through their imagined (future) loss just as much as the artist does. As we shall see, the “illogic” of anticipatory mourning is the basis of the healthy scientist’s own world view.

Freud’s mourning-based positivism is a procedural pursuit of truth that finds an almost exact parallel (or model) in economics and sociology (the quantitative discipline that positivism helped to define in the early nineteenth century). “Transience value,” Freud writes, “is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment”125 (305). The economic metaphors reflect Freud’s proceduralist positivism. If objects in a disenchanted world do not have intrinsic value, if they have only the value we give to them, then the concept of exchange value naturally replaces any notion of intrinsic value (and we might take note of the parallel replacement of natural causes by the rational-choice discourse of reasons and motivations). “When [mourning] has renounced everything that has been lost,” Freud tells us, “then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious” (306). The problem of value, for Freud, thus gets converted into economic terms. The model replacing of lost “objects” (meaning also ideas and ideals) gets translated into a model of how theories get replaced, a model which involves a planned and built-in obsolescence. All theories are provisional, everything is

125 Though I do not have space to do so here, it would be interesting to compare Freud’s economic metaphors, as a running motif throughout his work, with the “cash value” and business-world metaphors that James was fond of employing on occasion in his advertisements for pragmatist thinking. As we saw in Chapter Two, Jonathan Levin felt the need to defend James from charges of his ideological complicity with industrial capitalism (based partly on James’s own penchant for such metaphors).
open to revision. Mourning may come to a “spontaneous” end, but the nihilistic process of renunciation and reinvestment never comes to an end; the model of scientific theorizing that embraces the procedural transience of a theory (like a work of art) is an open-ended procedure that requires a repeated process of mourning.

Once Freud has established that the process of mourning is an essential component of the healthy-minded proceduralism of scientific inquiry itself, and he has thus already “accounted for” the poet’s melancholy as pathological by virtue of its incommensurability with the scientific method, Freud can then go on to play the role of the scientist and begin to treat the artist as a “problematic” and vaguely pathological case:

These considerations appeared to me incontestable; but I noticed that I had made no impression either upon the poet or upon my friend. My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgement, and I believed later that I had discovered what it was. What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease; and, since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience. (306)

It is hard to know where to begin in responding to Freud’s benighted account and what is almost certainly a gross misreading of his companions and their stubborn refusal to acknowledge (let alone contest) that which is incontestable; one can also easily imagine how Nietzsche would respond to Freud’s view of nature as an accessory for our enjoyment and his casual claim about the mind’s instinctive “recoil” from “anything painful.” Freud’s purpose here, of course, is not simply to analyze Rilke and Lou Salomé. His staging of the scientist’s heroically unbiased scientific inquiry (“what is true may nevertheless be painful”) reads as almost a caricature of the disingenuous “open inquiry” model of science. At this mid-point in the essay, having established the healthy-minded point of view, we are invited to approach a “problem” from the point of view that recognizes it only as a problem or a pathology. Freud wants to dramatize his own
process of scientific thinking, what he “was led to infer” in response to the failure of his view to make an impression on his friends (which is a rather transparent way of highlighting their failure to be receptive to the voice of reason). What Freud infers is the presence of some “emotional factor” — that is to say, an irrational factor — which was disturbing their judgement. He speculates, moreover, that their view must be a purely subjective and infantile response, “a revolt in their minds against mourning” — but, of course, Freud has already defined his own view as a healthy-minded one based on the process of mourning. And so the revolt “against mourning” means here a regressive and reactionary stance — the melancholy poet is cast as something of the philistine who resists (pathologically resists) all that is progressive and experimental. Freud thus presents the scientist as the one who is radically forward-looking, and the artist who is regressive (a “revolt against mourning” implies a resistance to progress).

Freud performs all of this question-begging inference without, it seems, the slightest trace of self-awareness or irony. But the most telling equivocation comes when Freud assumes the role of the poet/visionary, a panoramic eschatological vision of future catastrophe where Freud, paradoxically, most clearly manifests the anthropocentric bias at the heart of positivism and its social-procedural notion of scientific objectivity as a value:

A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely. Nor can I understand any better why the beauty and perfection of a work of art or of an intellectual achievement should lose its worth because of its temporal limitation. A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire to-day will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon the earth ceases; but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration. (307)

There is a telling double standard in how Freud views the present in terms of future loss, though from the scientist’s point of view and with the aim of establishing a different kind of value. Freud’s imagination of
future loss (the scientist’s, as opposed to the artist’s) steps outside the “pathological criteria” for healthy versus unhealthy response to loss. Freud does give a place to the projective imagination, and (as we see) he embarks on a poetic flight himself. Like Aristotle, he speaks of the visions and monumental creations of “great men,” the works of our poets and thinkers that may not be understood by others or appreciated by future generations. The argument here assumes the disenchantment of nature: nature has no intrinsic value except the value it has for us, for “our own emotional lives.” In an earlier passage, Freud offered as a consolation a variation on “man is the measure of all things”: “As regards the beauty of Nature,” Freud points out, “each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal.” So while we cannot derive an ought from an is (a cornerstone of disenchanted thinking), we can and must come up with a “form of life” that responds adequately and heroically to what is taken to be the human condition (no longer melancholia, but melancholy). Indeed, it is our duty to stay active and engaged in shared projects, to be carefully distinguished from private ones.

Freud gives one final demonstration of this healthy-minded process of inquiry, in a passage where he takes pains to emphasize the tentative and speculative nature of his theory-in-progress and draws attention to the contingent and transient character of his own theorizing, to its own planned and imminent obsolescence. This, as I have tried to show, is the cornerstone of Freud’s advertisement for the scientist’s healthy-minded view. And this uncertainty forces us to revise our understanding of melancholy versus mourning in the broader sense (as a response to the loss of an idea). Mourning over the loss of something we have loved, Freud explains, is a common experience, a process that the layman regards as commonplace and self-evident. “But to psychologists, mourning is a great riddle.”126 Freud, like the poet reading to his friends a few lines of a poem in progress, then gives a brief exposition of his as-yet-unpublished theory in progress. He highlights one problem that his theory leaves unresolved: the question of why the detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process. With regard to that question, Freud shifts to the first-person plural pronoun to report that “we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis [that would] account for it.” Almost needless to say, this represents a problem for future researchers to tackle. And the underlying explanation will no doubt be more complex.

126 In Freud’s original, it is not a mystery (Geheimnis), but a riddle (Rätsel).
than we realize, those complexities in turn revealing new unresolved problems which future research will inherit. The pattern is a familiar one, and we see how Freud identifies and frames the problem as a particular kind of problem. And the problem Freud chooses to highlight is actually, as I think is now clear, the least of the problems with Freud’s theorizing. The real problem – one which he oddly ignores in the space of this demonstration piece – has to do with the logic of anticipatory loss, with the conflation of actual and determinate loss with the idea of transience. This is a constitutive blindness for Freud, however, and the model of doing science that Freud has just advertised almost guarantees that we will seek to explain melancholia according to the metaphor of divestment and re-investment of libido, and speak of the value of objects (the way we appraise the value and promise of research projects, for example) in terms of instrumental value within the cultural marketplace as it is understood by the scientist.

The “demand for immortality” Freud writes, “is a product of our wishes too unmistakable to lay claim to reality: what is painful may none the less be true.” In a disenchanted culture, the impossible “demand for immortality” is replaced by the demand for social recognition. There is an important biographical and interpersonal dimension to Freud’s bid for the recognition of psychoanalysis that makes “On Transience” read even more like a work of literature. The two “sensitive minds” who were his companions were Rilke and Lou Salomé, and Freud was at the time still competing for the unrequited affections of Salomé. As we have seen, Freud presents himself as the noble and lucid visionary, the skeptical scientist as the heroic genius who sees farther than others, and in the passage where he addresses the “layperson” it is hard not to think of his “taciturn friend” – Lou Salomé – as the imagined addressee. Freud had only recently experienced the personal loss of a theory he particularly cherished: the discovery that his theory about Da Vinci’s unconscious and repressed thematic obsessions had been based on a factual error, a mistranslation of a key word in Da Vinci’s writings. He confessed his disappointment in a letter to Salomé. The Da Vinci study of 1910, Freud’s pioneering foray into psychoanalytic literary criticism, was a work in which Freud had invested a great deal and to which he gave an importance that now seems difficult to comprehend. In a letter to Salomé, he described the essay as the “only beautiful thing I have ever written.” This biographical context does not “explain” Freud’s strategy in “On Transience,” but it is one key to understanding the wider cultural context in which
Freud’s literary performance reads as a symptom. 

“But finally,” Freud intimated to Salomé, “the decision prevailed to struggle through alone, as far as one still has a miserable shred of solitude left.” What is painful may nevertheless be true.

Malcolm Bowie reads “On Transience” as a key to understanding Freud’s concept of science, and he finds the essay a useful way of bringing out the difference between Freud’s and Lacan’s concepts of psychoanalysis as a theoretical science. Bowie sees Freud’s eschatological vision of future catastrophe as more than a poetic flourish. The vision of ultimate catastrophe, the “truth of extinction,” is a premise on which the scientific imagination, as Freud understands it, is based. “But before he presses ahead in imagination to the worst, to the ending of days,” Bowie writes, “the objects of the world are perfectly still and available for inspection. For Freud, as for Leonardo, the individual bloom could be described in the multitude of its individual parts and its power of cohesion” (9). Freud has an analogous view of theories as works of art. Theories are testaments to the coherence and meaning that the creative mind (the scientist’s as well as the artist’s) confers upon an otherwise meaningless universe. Our knowledge of a theory’s eventual refutation and replacement will actually intensify our sense of its value as a testament to the synthetic powers of the theory-forming imagination, much in the same way as our knowledge of the eventual loss of the rose intensifies our appreciation of its current beauty. Bowie then contrasts Lacan’s and Freud’s concepts of scientific theorizing. Lacan rejects the idea of wholeness and coherence as a property of objects, and Bowie calls Lacan’s approach to theorizing an attempt to “write transience back into the psychoanalytic account of the human mind.”

I see Freud’s essay as illuminating and illustrative for different reasons, however. “On Transience” is, among things, a virtual textbook demonstration of Lacan’s Imaginary order and mirror stage. Lou Salomé plays the third-party role of the silent auditor in this triangular *menage*. Freud’s self-

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127 And it is symptomatic of values, including the ideal of the scientist as the misunderstood renegade-hero, that continue to thrive in our own time. In his 2006 review of Matthew Von Unwerth’s *Freud’s Requiem*, Hanif Kureishi concludes with an eloquent flourish making a case for the belated recognition of Freud’s importance as measured not by the truth of his scientific claims (which a century of criticism has turned into a crumbled “edifice”), but rather by virtue of the *future* research he has stimulated: “At a time when Freud’s irrelevance is gleefully celebrated, von Unwerth illustrates the truth of Trilling’s remark that Freud is ‘a quarry not an edifice’ - that, far from having been dismissed, his work continues to generate new work, like a burst of fresh associations. There are few, if any, brain scientists or behavioural therapists of whom this can be said.” If only Lou Salomé had known...
ennobling and simultaneously self-abasing bid for recognition illustrates, in a microcosm, the psychic economy of Victorian culture. And it has an almost exact parallel in Woolf's modernist critique of a culture trapped within that imaginary realm in the triangular relationship that Woolf dramatizes in *To the Lighthouse* between the characters of Lily Briscoe, the young aspiring scholar Charles Tansley, and the melancholy Victorian Mr. Ramsay (a character based on Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen). In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe plays something close to the role of the “taciturn” Lou Salomé. Mr. Ramsay is Woolf's portrait not only of her father, but of a type of emotionally needy Victorian melancholic whose “demands for sympathy can never be met,” as Woolf puts it in her 1926 essay “On Being Ill” (9-12).

3. **Virginia Woolf: On Gloomy Egoists and the Need for Atmosphere**

“On Being Ill” was composed the same year Woolf was finishing work on *To the Lighthouse*, and it may be read as a gloss on the novel – among other things, placing the celebrated “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* in a perhaps new light. The essay, which I will look at later in this section, presents an extended meditation on the relation between “illness” (which Woolf vaguely employs as a cognate term for *melancholy*) and the power and consolations of the poet’s vision of the world. Among other things, though, Woolf’s meditation has the effect of complicating our reading of the poetic language we read “Time Passes.” Consider, for example, the following central passage in “Time Passes”:

> At that season those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine bounty—the sunset on the sea, the pallor of dawn, the moon rising, fishing-boats against the moon, and children making mud pies or pelting each other with handfuls of grass, something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity. There was the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; there was a

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128 Lou Salome, according to most accounts, including Nietzsche’s, was in fact a memorably stimulating conversationalist and anything but “taciturn” (although we may guess at the reasons for her reticence when confronted with Freud’s incomprehension).

129 See, for example, the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, page 59, for an account of the genesis of the “Time Passes” section, Woolf’s misgivings about its language, and the revisions she made following the publication of a French translation of the section (as a stand-alone text) in 1926.
purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath. This intrusion into a scene calculated to stir the most sublime reflections and lead to the most comfortable conclusions stayed their pacing. It was difficult blandly to overlook them; to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within.

Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacence she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was then but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken.

[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.]\(^{130}\)

On the surface, this response to the losses may seem perfectly in the spirit of Freud’s disenchanted argument for how to make sense of the fact of transience. We might even set the disenchanted vision presented here alongside Freud’s own poetic vision of disaster in “On Transience.” We can say with some confidence that the renewed interest in poetry, matter-of-factly noted in the bracketed aside, was probably *not* an interest in poems like *The Waste Land* (“I had not thought death had undone so many”) or Hugh Selwyn Mauberly’s lament over the “myriad that had died,” or even poetically experimental novels like *Jacob’s Room* with a miniscule initial print-run. Mr. Carmichael’s poems are probably closer in genre to the elegiac and pastoral poetry of A. E. Housman and Wilfred Owen, for which indeed there was a *renewed* interest (especially for older volumes like Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*, which appeared decades before the war and only later found its elegiac “subject matter.”) It is a prime example of the regressive anticipatory mourning that Freud attributed to the melancholy poet). And there is certainly no need to revive an interest in poetry in a member of the reading public like Mr. Ramsay, who exhibited an

\(^{130}\) Brackets are in the original, of course.
interest in poetry prior to all this; as we saw in the first part of the novel, he finds sustenance in habitually quoting to himself fragments of poetry, such as Cowper’s “we perish, each alone.” So do we read irony into the bracketed comment above? Does it register a turn away from the consolations of nature and “beauty,” to the consolations of a poeticized nature of trees in bloom? Is the war the cause of this disillusionment with nature and at the same time the cause of the boom in popularity of poems that somehow appeal differently to nature? Of the quite different-sounding poetic language that appears outside the bracketed comments in “Time Passes,” we might well ask: Who is talking here?\textsuperscript{131} The walker on the beach is clearly Mr. Ramsay, as we have been informed earlier in the section, and these are presumably his private meditations as he goes on his walks. There is another level of distanced commentary in the recurring parenthetic refrains – “beauty offers her lures, has her consolations” – which are clearly ironic and closer in tone to the language of the bracketed comments that appear throughout the section.

Does this present a narrative of personal and cultural disenchantment, or is it a portrait of an already disenchanted Victorian thinking that has to re-stage for itself this “break up,” this failed appeal to nature? In Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” the “mirror” of nature shatters so that the speaker can contemplate the fragments – the pebbles whose random jostling on the shore echoes the later metaphor of the ignorant armies that clash by night:

Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Arnold’s speaker stages this scene of disillusionment for himself, but the staging requires the indifference of nature (which, like Thomas Hardy’s non-existent God, has to be invoked as an addressee) as well as the real or imagined presence of a third-party auditor (“Listen!” he calls to this unnamed person, after he has invited her to look out the window with him a few lines earlier). This is a hallmark strategy of Arnold’s

\textsuperscript{131} As Erich Auerbach famously put it in his reading of a passage in part one of the novel. (“The Brown Stocking” chapter in Mimesis)
love poems, and to our ears a rather transparent one in its bid for sympathy. We see a similar strategy employed, for example, in the well-known poem “Isolation: To Margeurite,” the title of which is itself a symptom of the paradox of which Arnold himself may not have been fully aware: a “break-up” poem in which the speaker draws upon his feelings of isolation in a desperate attempt to construct an imaginary identity for himself as isolated (to “prove [this truth]” and “make thine own: / ‘Thou hast been, shalt be, art, alone.’”), a strategy that depends ironically upon an elaborate series of appeals to imagined third parties – including a projected image of the ex-lover and an imagined identification with a world indifferent to human interests and populated by “unmating things.”

132 Arnold seems to have had a hard time finding closure for this strategy: He has a lot to say in his isolation, about his isolation, as he gradually establishes an attitude and works out an identity for himself. In “To Margeurite: Continued,” Arnold continues his meditation in four additional stanzas that serve as something of an “addendum” to “Isolation”:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,

We mortal millions live alone.
The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know.

But when the moon their hollows lights,
And they are swept by balms of spring,
And in their glens, on starry nights,
The nightingales divinely sing;
And lovely notes, from shore to shore,
Across the sounds and channels pour—

Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent;
For surely once, they feel, we were
Parts of a single continent!
Now round us spreads the watery plain—
Oh might our marges meet again!

Who order'd, that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled, cool'd?
Who renders vain their deep desire?—
A God, a God their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

Arnold’s elaborate Victorian imaginary is in man ways an archetypal and representative. The best reading of the poem, in this regard, is by Charles Altieri (in The Particulars of Rapture), who sums up the poem as the embodiment of “everything that the modernists hated about Victorian efforts to stage their own nobility in terms of the lucidity they could bring to bear on their experiences” (90). This is pretty close
read Woolf’s “Time Passes” as an imagined version of Matthew Arnold’s speaker who has lost the “mirror” of the third-party auditor; it is a meditation on what happens when we can no longer adopt the strategy of appealing to the fact of transience and the truth of existence as sources of consolation once we experience the loss of the necessary third component in this rhetorical triangle. The melancholy Victorian can still recuperate his time-tested strategy; but what Mr. Ramsay and Arnold demonstrate is the extent to which that strategy involves an imaginary theater. They are both “gloomy egoists” trapped in a self-sustaining psychic economy in which the demand for sympathy, as Woolf puts it, can never be met.

While she was composing “Time Passes” in the summer of 1926, Woolf privately expressed reservations about the language being excessively “poetic” and Victorian-sounding, indicating perhaps the fear of entering into the emotional world of her father and adopting his language without the proper distance from it. The bracketed asides that famously appear throughout the section are abrupt markers of the ironic distance she wanted to maintain. But it is the language, above all, that Woolf gets right in her portrait. In her account of the rhythms of a soul in conversation with itself, Woolf gives us an anatomy of a period-specific disenchanted melancholy as vivid as “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” What Woolf

to Arnold’s own assessment of his significance. In a letter of 1869, Arnold predicted that his time will come by virtue of his poems’ failure to achieve a certain level of greatness:

My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might be fairly urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn as they have had theirs.

Compare, for example, with James’s portrait of the “gloomy egoist”:

For instance, on the very day on which I write this page, the post brings me some aphorisms from a worldly-wise old friend in Heidelberg which may serve as a good contemporaneous expression of Epicureanism: “By the word ‘happiness’ every human being understands something different. It is a phantom pursued only by weaker minds. The wise man is satisfied with the more modest but much more definite term contentment. What education should chiefly aim at is to save us from a discontented life. Health is one favoring condition, but by no means an indispensable one, of contentment. Woman’s heart and love are a shrewd device of Nature, a trap which she sets for the average man, to force him into working. But the wise man will always prefer work chosen by himself.” (Varieties 135)

133 I borrow this term from the title of Eleanor Sickels’ 1932 study The Gloomy Egoist, an obscure but wonderfully insightful study that I came across by accident in the course of researching this project.
described as her therapeutic “exorcising” of the ghost of her father involved working through the language of her father and the needs that it staged for itself. As she composed “Time Passes,” it inevitably became more of a representative portrait of a entire period and of a period-specific sensibility that had been lost. If this section of the novel captures a particular response to the catastrophe of war and loss of a world, then it becomes clear that modernists like Woolf were responding to the loss of a culture that was quite different from the one Freud seems to have had in mind. There is no way of knowing what Rilke actually said to Freud on their walk, or whether indeed that walk in the countryside really ever took place. But we can easily imagine a modernist artist’s typical objection to Freud’s limited and somewhat quaint motive of the private “enjoyment” of nature. We can easily imagine Rilke thinking little of the picturesque value of the landscape as an Arnoldian correlate to the “vanity of human wishes.” It is not nature itself that has suddenly lost its value; it has already been drained of its intrinsic value in a disenchanted culture (as Freud’s positivism, for example, demonstrates). What has been lost is the conventional appeal to nature in its role as an imaginary source of consolation. Modernists like Woolf, we might say, were disillusioned with the identity-forming strategies of disenchanted thinking itself, a total reaction upon life that was also, among other things, a powerful mode of consolation and an effective means of securing an image for an otherwise insecure and insubstantial self. Woolf, like many others of her generation, was in search of an entirely new way of relating to the world that did not revert to earlier Romantic notions of natural fact as both a source and “mirror” of human values (which were tenuous notions, even for Wordsworth’s generation). The post-lapsarian demand for recognition, replacing what Freud dismissed as the “demand for immortality,” generated a psychic economy that Virginia Woolf, no less than William James, felt was a dead-end and a cultural source of blindness – not to mention the cause of insufferably talk-filled walks through the countryside with companions who seemed most interested in eliciting compliments for their boots (as Mr. Ramsay demands of Lily Briscoe) and encouragement for continuing in their work (as Freud demands of Lou Salomé).

In contrast with the ambivalently voiced poetry that Woolf holds at an arm’s length in “Time Passes,” we find on the first page of “On Being Ill” an exuberantly playful and parodic brand of language. Sounding somewhat like the scientist locating an unexplored area for future research, Woolf begins her
essay by complaining that very little has been written about the subject of illness. This claim, of course, is far from true, as her densely allusive opening makes clear. The first sentence alone is a virtual catalog and whirlwind tour of motifs found throughout the history of writing on the subject of melancholy:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth--rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us--when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. (3)

We see here are allusions to Hamlet's "undiscovered country," and everywhere -- particularly in the playfully ambiguous handling of the somatic/spiritual theme -- we find the voice and the characteristic approach of Robert Burton. In Woolf's essay, all of these allusions unfold in a single, uninterrupted opening sentence that gives us taste of the wild, rollercoaster style that lies ahead of us.134

The essay is, among other things, a parody of what James called the reductive reign of "medical materialism." At the same time, it is also an argument emphasizing what James called the extent to which "our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame" ("What is an Emotion" 201). The object of Woolf's criticism, however, is literature as well as science. In a passage reminiscent of James's opening

134 A 28-page essay that, in the Paris Press edition, consists of only ten paragraphs, many of them running over several pages.
to “What is an Emotion?”, Woolf complains of a certain blind spot in traditional fiction and literature that
does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through
which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is
null, and negligible and non-existent” (4). This is a puzzling claim, as we have already noted. But we
eventually learn that Woolf is complaining of a specific kind of literature – plot-driven realist fiction, which
includes what we might call psychological realism.\footnote{See page 19, where she writes: “Illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose
exacts: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is not the book for influenza, nor The Golden Bowl,
nor Madame Bovary.”} What we need as a supplement to the mind-body
dualism of conventional storytelling, Woolf argues, is a “robust philosophy,” a “reason rooted in the
bowels of the earth” (5).

The essay lends itself to a biographical reading, and its is easy to paraphrase as a playful but at
bottom earnest defense of illness as a source of creativity. The phantasmagorical experiences and bouts
of depression that Woolf describes are largely drawn from her own experience, which is often a harrowing
one. The line between fancy and hallucination for Woolf was a finely drawn and perilous one. (She had
suffered a severe breakdown as recently as 1926; in an earlier bout, she recalled hearing birds speak in
Greek. As is well known, Woolf based the character of Mr. Ramsay on her father, the archetypal
Victorian Leslie Stephen, who positioned himself ambiguously as a scholar and public intellectual,
something of a blend of Matthew Arnold and William Clifford, and bearing perhaps a little resemblance to
another fictional character, George Eliot’s Casaubon, who in his career could not quite get to “Q” let alone
“R.” It is easy to read the essay as a parallel defense of what the artist does with her “illness,” in contrast
to the heroic melancholy of her industrious father. “On Being Ill” demonstrates quite clearly the close
proximity of the artist’s melancholy to the stoically resigned and self-protective strategy of Mr. Ramsay:
they both demand sympathy, and they both thrive on the imaginary pleasures afforded by solitude. Woolf
opens with a brush-stroke of irony: “Wonderful to relate, poets have found religion in nature; people live in
the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their indifference that they are comforting.” And she then
notes that the “great artists ... console not by their thought of us but by their forgetfulness [of us]”\(^{136}\) (15-16).

Woolf casts her argument as a defense of illness in contrast with what she calls the “army of the upright,” aligning herself (as William James does) with the “sick-souled” as against the “healthy-minded.” Here is an example of the pleasures and epiphanies that we are given access to when we join this band of conscientious objectors that station themselves at the margins of “normal” society:

Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it!—this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and wagons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away—this endless activity, with the waste of Heaven knows how many million horse power of energy, has been left to work its will year in year out. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Ought not some one to write to \textit{The Times}? Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house. (13-14)

Melancholy writing, as Woolf imagines it elsewhere in the essay, will probably “be something laughable” (7). This example that Woolf offers of an “epiphany” experienced by the ill person is whimsical in tone, but it is also (for some readers) faintly embarrassing; as readers, we might tend to sympathize with the reaction of the hypothetical pedestrians who Woolf imagines “would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer” seen lying on her back in the middle of a city sidewalk (13). What do we make of Woolf’s irony here? The entire essay is playful and arch in its humor, but its irony may be more unstable and thorough-going than is generally recognized. At least one critic\(^ {137}\) has reacted negatively to Woolf’s

\(^{136}\) This, I would argue, reads more like an argument for Eliotic impersonality and for literature as an “escape from personality,” and more specifically from the self-centered neediness of the melancholic.

\(^{137}\) Judith Shulevitz, in a review from which I will quote later in this chapter.
celebration of illness as coming dangerously close to exemplifying what Susan Sontag (in her 1978 essay on illness) called the nineteenth-century “cult of being interesting.” So the question about how Woolf pitches her irony in “On Being Ill” is closely tied to the way we interpret the essay as a critique and as making any claims at all—essentially, the question of how seriously we are to take the essay as a whole. It is, after all, an essay, a critique perhaps but one complicated by a playful testing out of many possible orientations and responses.138

As critics have noted, there is a neat contrast between Woolf’s “defense” of illness and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s well-known critique of the same medical culture in her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Woolf and Gilman were both prescribed “rest cures” as the standard-issue treatment for their “feminine” bouts of depression. Both authors critique the psychiatric practice of their time (and the patriarchal culture) that established this double standard for diagnosing melancholia in women as opposed to men. Gilman’s essay “Why I Wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper,”” which gives a brief account of the actual events fictionalized in the story, concludes with a celebration of the “work cure” that sounds like the opposite of Woolf’s ironic stance.139 Gilman, by contrast, seems to advocate work and the healthyminded industriousness of the “army of the upright”:

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist’s advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which

138 Notes from Sick Rooms written by her mother, Julia Stephen, in 1883. is one of the many books on illness that Woolf claims do not exist ... and it sounds at times remarkably similar to Woolf’s ironic voice. We see the same arch humor here, the hyperbole, and more parody of scientific language as a mode of attention to problems, a parody of her father’s Victorian scientism from her mother’s point of view:

Among the number of small evils which haunt illness, the greatest, in the misery it can cause, though the smallest in size, is crumbs. The origin of most things has been decided on, but the origin of crumbs in bed has never excited sufficient attention among the scientific world, though it is a problem which has tormented many a weary sufferer.

139 We might even draw a comparison between Woolf’s example of fancy – her immersion in the mutability and play of changing cloud formations – and the “hallucinations” Gilman’s semi-fictional character experiences as she stares at the wallpaper in her room.
one is a pauper and a parasite--ultimately recovering some measure of power. [italics added]140 (46)

The problem, or rather difference from Woolf, is not the paean to "work" per se (writing of course could also be a form of work, and that is likely what Gilman had in mind); the problem has more to do with the Victorian language in which Gilman couches her advocacy, language that is hard to distinguish from the voice of Leslie Stephen or Mr. Ramsay. If they are read as polemics, then neither Woolf nor Gilman, however, represents an adequate as a response to the underlying values of the culture for which Freud argues in "On Transience."

Even if we do not read large stretches of Woolf's essay (such as the cloud-watching passage quoted) as ironic in quite the thorough-going way that I am suggesting -- and most readers, it seems, do not read it that way -- then problems still emerge with Woolf's argument in "On Being Ill," insofar of course as we read it as a polemic or manifesto. Woolf implies that melancholy writing will necessarily be experimental writing. But she also gives us a vague and problematic vision of what that writing is supposed to do. Is it merely expression as diversion, an outlet for keeping busy, one of many means of "killing the serpent of time"?141 If there is an existing form of writing that historically deserves the label of "melancholy" writing, then it is the essay as form. In "On Being Ill," Woolf writes that the fluid form of the discursive essay is the kind of literature the ill person wants to read, as opposed to the plot "structures" of large realist fiction. We might even contrast the essay with the closed symmetrical structure of To the

140 Here is Gilman's account of the events leading up to her prescribed "rest cure," in the passage that precedes her celebration of the "work cure":

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia--and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887. I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over. (46)

141 ...to quote from Charles Lamb, one of Woolf's models of essay writing and whom Woolf admired for successfully overcoming his illness by transmuting it into an expressive activity.
Lighthouse, which famously concludes with a synthesizing and private gesture: “I have had my vision,” Lily Briscoe declares once she has finished her painting. It must be acknowledged, however, that the tongue-in-cheek polemical portions of her essay do not make an entirely compelling case. Woolf’s impressionism (illustrated by the cloud-watching episode) does not succeed in converting facts into possibilities; she turns facts into impressions and possibilities into bed-ridden fantasies. The real issue, though, is the privacy of the visions and the failure to make a case for the “general validity” of an illness, such as the case philosopher Merleau-Ponty makes for Cezanne’s artistic transformation of his “schizothymia.” In a 2006 review of the reprinted edition of “On Being Ill,” critic Ruth Franklin captures the basic inadequacy with the vaguely impressionistic aesthetic that Woolf seems to celebrate as an alternative to the healthy-minded values of the “army of the upright”:

And yet the consolations of creation are also considered. When Woolf imagines beauty in a frozen-over garden, even after the death of the sun—There, thrusting its head up undaunted in the starlight, the rose will flower, the crocus will bloom — it seems less a triumph of nature than of art.

142 In his classic essay “Cezanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty diagnoses Cezanne with “schizothymia,” a disorder that involves the flattening or waning of affect, and in the course of his exploration of the relationship between illness and creativity he gives an exemplary account of the way melancholy functions as a mode of abstraction in modernist aesthetics.

Merleau-Ponty is sympathetic to psychoanalytic explanations of artists’ attempts to overcome problems (such as Freud’s study of Da Vinci), so long as these efforts were recognized as having a potentially wider cultural validity and the illness “becomes a general possibility of human existence.” “It is quite possible that, on the basis of his nervous weaknesses, Cézanne conceived a form of art which is valid for everyone. Left to himself, he could look at nature as only a human being can.” While an artist’s life does not explain his work, the two are still connected. “The truth is that this work to be done called for this life” (284). Merleau-Ponty continues:

There is a rapport between Cézanne's schizoid temperament and his work because the work reveals a metaphysical sense of the disease: a way of seeing the world reduced to the totality of frozen appearances, with all expressive values suspended. Thus the illness ceases to be an absurd fact and a fate and becomes a general possibility of human existence. It becomes so when this existence bravely faces one of its paradoxes, the phenomenon of expression. (284-285)

The flattening and waning of affect is, in fact, fundamental to Merleau-Ponty’s s entire concept of phenomenology – the aim of which, he says, is to “slacken the intentional threads which attach us to the world” (Phenomenology of Perception, xv).
We might ask, following Shulevitz’s critique, how the “consolations of creation” are fundamentally different from Mr. Ramsay’s consoling walks on the beach or from Freud’s “enjoyment” of nature. On this reading, Woolf’s essay comes off as more of an argument for the fancy rather than the power of the imagination. What Woolf offers is a testament to the power of a sensibility to imagine and project value, rather than create or discover it – involving a notion of art as subjective consolation for the indifference of the world, which we can only passively contemplate and treat as the raw material for our fancy. Woolf offers private consolation in the form of “enjoying” the passing sensations to which one is receptive. It is a passive enjoyment of the flux of things, a celebration of private aesthetic vision that invokes visions of future catastrophe and is premised on the same fact/value nihilism that we see in Freud. Woolf’s conscientious objector does little more than passively watch these shapes (the clouds) take form. It may be marvelous, but all one can do is marvel at it. Nature is still fallen and disenchanted, and the triumph of artistic form is also entirely subjective. It is beautiful; but it is just literature.

To anatomize a problem, then, is not necessarily to solve it or to locate a viable alternative strategy. I would argue, however, that “On Being Ill” goes even farther than To the Lighthouse in imagining an alternative to the disenchanted values that she captures so well in her portrait of Mr. Ramsay. But we must direct our attention to what I see as the most remarkable (and somewhat neglected) passage in Woolf’s essay: the long digression that brings the essay to a close, and which is signalled by an abrupt (and self-referencing) shift in language. After a brief mention of Shakespeare, Woolf interrupts her own train of thought: “But enough of Shakespeare – let us turn to Augustus Hare. There are people who say that even illness does not warrant these transitions…” (23). And so we are asked to turn our attention to the eccentric Victorian writer Augustus Hare, author of a number of fact-filled volumes detailing the history of his own family (some of them involving ghosts of family members as characters). Hare, Woolf tells us, is at the opposite pole from “great writers” such as Shakespeare (but also avoids the worst category of “mediocre writers”). Woolf picks up, seemingly at random, The Story of Two Noble Lives.

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143 Woolf, it seems, was drawn for similar reasons to the writing of Sir John Evelyn, an eccentric contemporary of Samuel Pepys, whose diaries are famous for lacking any sense of drama or atmosphere or surprise. See “Rambling Round Evelyn” in The Common Reader, volume 1.
There, as so often in these fat volumes, we flounder and threaten to sink in a plethora of aunts and uncles. We have to remind ourselves that there is such a thing as atmosphere; that the masters themselves often keep us waiting intolerably while they prepare our minds for whatever it may be – the surprise, or the lack of surprise. (24)

Without “atmosphere,” however, we drown in a “plethora of aunts and uncles” (24). Woolf brings atmosphere to this potentially overwhelming array of details by picking among them and re-telling Hare’s story, by navigating her way through these absurdly disconnected and various facts with as little care for proper transitions as the author himself apparently felt. The “atmosphere” Woolf has in mind here is not scenic at all; it is an abstract and form-giving atmosphere in active dialogue with shifting moods and whims and desires. Like the great masters, Hare “takes his time; the charm steals upon us imperceptibly; by degrees we become almost one of the family, yet not quite, for the sense of our oddity of it all remains...” (24). This is the last time Woolf employs a “we” in the essay. Almost imperceptibly, we then enter into a “shaggy dog” re-telling mode as the voice addressing us promptly disappears into the text:

for the sense of our oddity of it all remains, and [we] share the family dismay when Lord Stuart leaves the room – there was a ball going forward – and is next heard of in Iceland. Parties, he said, bored him – such were English aristocrats before marriage with intellect had adulterated the fine singularity of their minds. Parties bore them; they are off to Iceland. Then Beckford’s mania for castle building attacked him; he must lift a French chateau across the channel, and erect pinnacles and towers to use as servants’ bedrooms at vast expense, upon the borders of a crumbling cliff, too, so that housemaids saw their brooms swimming down the Solent, and Lady Stuart was much distressed, but made the best of it and began, like the high-born lady she was, planting evergreens in the face of ruin. (24-25)

And so on, continuously, for three more pages (uninterrupted by paragraph breaks). Like the great masters, as she noted earlier, Woolf can forget us (the readers) because her writing here – which
consists of the activities of selective summarizing and paraphrase – so closely models a kind of active reading. It is the essayist’s imagination that “catches fire on what others have already done,” as Adorno puts it in “The Essay as Form” (152). This final passage demonstrates why it is that so much melancholy writing, as a form of forgetting, will never be about melancholy as a subject. It is forgetfulness not in the sense of abandonment, but rather in the way it focuses on its own act of articulation. Above all, this concluding digression demonstrates the essential absurdity of fact and the way active articulation of facts creates “atmosphere.” Melancholy writing of this kind (and we will see more like it in the writing of Robert Walser) demands much more than passive submission to shifting moods, more than brooding contemplation over the “mystic” qualities of words as artifacts. Such writing needs to find a way to create value (form, or “atmosphere”) in the act of re-telling, in the act of articulation itself. If we want to find evidence of Nietzsche’s impact on a generation’s concept of art, we could do worse than turn to this obscure passage that re-tells the work of an obscure fourth-rate writer with no particular audience in mind.

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I have one final observation to make on Woolf’s account of melancholy writing as experimental writing. “On Being Ill” was a commissioned piece for T.S. Eliot’s new journal The Criterion, and Woolf biographer Hermione Lee goes so far as to read the essay as a thinly veiled personal plea to her famous editor, also a personal friend, to be more sensitive to his mentally unstable wife. Such biographical interpretations, however well-founded, often come at the cost of dissociating Woolf from the concerns that identify her as a modernist writer. I think there are more important affinities between Eliot and Woolf, as well as important divergences. Compare, for example, Woolf’s call for a newly sensual language with the proto-modernist qualities that Eliot praises in the English Metaphysical poets. Eliot’s manifesto highlights the way Metaphysical poets produced uncanny new associations; Eliot quotes specific lines and juxtapositions, such as Donne’s “bracelet of bright hair about the bone,” and (based on these examples) he concludes his essay with a thought experiment juxtaposing the smell of cooking with the experience of

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144 As Robert Walser put it: “The lively is always more contemplative than what is dead and sad.”
145 This melodramatic biographical reading bears a problematic relation to reality. In fact, Woolf herself expressed little sympathy for Vivienne Eliot and as she suffered from her illness; in fact she could be cruel toward her (once rather uncharitably describing Eliot’s wife as “a bag of ferrets tied around his neck”).
reading Spinoza as an example of how poetry creates new affective complexes. In “On Being Ill,” Woolf considers – and then sets aside and seems to reject – what she characterizes as the auditory materialist imagination of Mallarmé and the French Symbolists and their search for idiosyncratic words and images that has a precedent (as Eliot recognized) in English Metaphysical poetry. “In health,” Woolf observes, “meaning has encroached upon sound” and “words seem to possess a mystic quality ... incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness.” The kind of writing that appeals to readers in an ill state of mind (and her emphasis at this point is on illness as it manifests itself in the reader) will probably seem laughable to most healthy-minded readers, but it will be above all “incomprehensible” to those who demand that language communicate rather than somehow embody meaning. Elaborating on a claim she began to make early in her essay, Woolf claims once more that we need “a new language ... more primitive, more sensual, more obscene.” But now Woolf seems to change her mind. What we really need, she suggests, is something more than this sensual and incomprehensible language; what we need above all, she claims, is “a new hierarchy of passions; love must be deposed in favor of a temperature of 104 ... sleeplessness [must] play the part of a villain” (7). Illness itself must become a mode of intentionality, a mode of creating meaning and satisfying our compositional need for “atmosphere.”

If we are looking for a more explicit manifesto for melancholy writing, rather than a sample of what it looks like, then we might turn to Woolf’s 1929 essay on Thomas Browne, which reads as something of a complement to Eliot’s classic 1921 modernist manifesto on the English Metaphysical Poets (which, like Woolf’s essay on Browne, was actually a review of a newly published anthology). Samuel Johnson’s famous complaint about “images yoked by violence together” is exactly the uncanny disjunctive effects that appealed to Eliot and other modernists. Johnson had a similar criticism of Browne’s disjunctive style: “His style is, indeed, a tissue of many languages; a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another.” Eliot, in his essay, draws attention to exactly these features as a resource for modernist poetry, which must be “difficult” in order to comprehend and respond adequately to the complexity, variousness, and industriousness of modern life.
Woolf, however, has a quite different take on the demands that modernist writing must face. In her essay on Thomas Browne, she praises Browne for his uncanny images and idiosyncratic associations, but she cautions us to look beyond these local effects when reading his essays: 

A bold and prodigious appetite for the drums and tramplings of language is balanced by the most exquisite sense of mysterious affinities between ghosts and roses. But these dissections are futile enough, and indeed by drawing attention to the technical side of Sir Thomas’s art do him some disservice. In books as in people, graces and charms are delightful for the moment but become insipid unless they are felt to be part of some general energy or quality of character. (369)

Woolf is drawing our attention here to the active and purposive play of the intelligence that creates “atmosphere” through the compositional energies of articulation and the “quality of character” it manifests. The evidence of a compositional intelligence in the act of “assaying” and articulating itself – this, Woolf argues, is what matters in Browne, not the local idiosyncrasies of style or the uncanny effects of odd images and juxtapositions. The parts need to be understood in the context of a whole – not an organic, closed whole, but within the larger context of what the essay composes for consciousness. “Paragraphs are emotional,” as Gertrude Stein claimed, while sentences are not. Woolf’s rather Nietzschean account of Browne’s peculiar force of imagination might also be interpreted as a more general challenge to avant-garde poetics (such as Surrealism) that focus on uncanny effects and on locally disjunctive formal features that Eliot praises in Metaphysical Poetry.

4. The Right to Romance and the Will to Believe

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146 In The Case of Wagner, one of his final works, Nietzsche writes that “[t]he sign of every literary decadence: That life no longer dwells in the whole” (p. 626) Nietzsche admits, moreover, that he is himself an example of this decadence.

147 As we will see in Chapter Four, Emerson advises the beginning writer to “do no violence to words. Use them etymologically.”
This chapter opened with a look at what I take to be an early modernist manifesto, James’s essay “What is an Emotion?” I now want to look briefly at a well-known polemic from James’s middle-period, the 1896 essay “The Will to Believe,” whose central argument has long been regarded as problematic at best (and with which James himself, it seems, felt dissatisfied). The earlier essay had ended by declaring that the argument for the “priority of bodily symptoms” in any account of the emotions had the benefit of demonstrating “the ease with which we formulate by its means pathological cases and normal cases under a common scheme.” We might read this as an unorthodox argument for a version of Occam’s Razor. Later, in Varieties of Religious Experience, James gives a defense of “illness” from the “robust” type of the healthy-minded positivist:

Few of us are not in some way infirm, or even diseased; and our very infirmities help us unexpectedly. In the psychopathic temperament we have the emotionality which is the sine qua non of moral perception; we have the intensity and tendency to emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigor […] What, then, is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe, which your robust Philistine type of nervous system, forever offering its biceps to be felt, thumping its breast, and thanking Heaven that it hasn’t a single morbid fibre in its composition, would be sure to hide forever from its self-satisfied possessors? (Varieties 30)

In “The Will to Believe,” James had earlier employed some of the same language he uses here (using the adjective “robustious”) in his critique/portrait of William Clifford, mathematician and late nineteenth-century spokesperson for the scientific method. It is not just Clifford who is the object of James’s critique, (he mentions Clough and Huxley as well) but he has come to stand for James’s polemical opponent in the anthologies, somewhat the way Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce will always be paired as stock representatives of their respective “views” (as if they were captains of a debating team). The question James asks in “Will to Believe,” however, is more a reflective one than an epistemological or even a psychological one: Why is it that healthy-minded empiricists like Clifford and Huxley feel so strongly in
the procedure of socially justified belief as a consolation? And by the time James comes around to quoting the poetic lines from Clough: "It fortifies my soul to know / That, though I perish, Truth is so" (the language here quite close to William Cowper’s "we perish, each alone") we see clearly how, as with Freud, the sentimentality of positivist nihilism blends easily into an Arnoldian poetic voice. James also opens and closes his essay with extended passages quoted from the inspirational writings of FitzJames Stephen, who happens to have been Virginia Woolf’s uncle.

James begins his critique of the verificationist procedures by which one justifies belief with a unorthodox opening move. He suggests that belief, including the empirically justified belief of the scientist, is more like faith than we would care to admit, and he considers as an example of justifying one’s belief, the risk-analysis logic of Pascal’s wager. He transfers Pascal’s logic to the realm of scientific hypotheses, which he defines in broadly pragmatic terms. James distinguishes between two types of hypotheses. There are “live options,” in which our belief would make a real imagined difference in our lives; and there are “dead options,” in which “no tendency to act on it exists in us to any degree” (Pragmatism and other Essays 199) In one of many passages in James that anticipate Wittgenstein, James asks whether it even makes sense to talk about beliefs as having the form of a propositional attitude (like a desiring something) or as taking an object (which raises the question of whether believe in something can be thought of as a volitional act). James looks at believing as a “language game,” and he literally adopts the metaphor of the gaming table (Pascal’s wager) as a possible way of reframing empiricism and justified belief in terms of action.

One possible response to William Clifford’s strictures on justified belief would be to argue for an indifference to questions of belief and to questions of morality and measurable social utility. Instead of quoting Fitzjames Stephen at length, we might draw on the wisdom of another Victorian, Lewis Carroll, and his White Queen who could believe as many as six impossible things at the same time (all before breakfast). But that is not the path James takes in “Will to Believe.” James, the admiring heir to Mill,

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148 In The Robber, Walser’s narrator seems to share James’s skepticism with regard to the therapeutic practices of “mind-cure” specialists and their investment in the power of belief, which leads to what Walser’s narrator calls “a perfectly simple, paltry condition of the soul.” Unlike the James of “The Will to Believe,” Walser (or his narrator, at least) takes a much more Nietzschean stance toward the concept of belief itself: “for one achieves nothing by it, absolutely nothing, nothing at all. One just sits there and believes. Like a person mechanically knitting a sock.” (qtd. in The Tanners 27).
still plays by the logic of the justified belief game and argues instead for something like a right to believe in the absence of evidence, for a distinction between different kinds of situations in which we are forced (or not forced) to make a decision to believe in something in the absence of evidence. At this point, he is looking for a less objectionable empiricism and method of justifying beliefs, more along the lines of Pascal’s wager, and not a radical alternative to all talk of belief and any concern of justifying one’s beliefs to others or to one’s self. So in spite of the sharp psychological diagnosis of the problem with epistemic values, it is important to recognize that James is still playing by the rules of this game. For even the most sympathetic readers, the response to James’s argument is the same as the typical response to Pascal's argument that James describes. As James puts it, “you probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming table, it is put to its last trumps” (ibid 201). But that does not mean “The Will to Believe” is without value as a critique of positivism. What the essay does most clearly, I think, is to demonstrate the problematic strategy of arguing for a right to believe, and to make clear the need for a Nietzschean approach to the crisis of epistemic culture.

James would have had little trouble taking apart Freud’s explanatory hypotheses put forth in “Mourning and Melancholia,” but he does have real trouble with the ethical argument of Clifford for adopting the values of science. On his own terms, William Clifford is a rather formidable representative of the disenchant ed verificationist values he advocates, because he understands them more clearly in ethical and social terms and in terms of a clean distinction between individual rights versus public obligations. This comes rather close to James’s own pluralistic sentiments (which he derives in part from Mill). James diagnoses the positivist’s fear of error as, at bottom, a fear of truth. But the motivating concern, for positivism, is not fear of truth but the incommensurability of perspectives and fear of people not being able to communicate with one another. Freud would also, of course, identify modern science as a cultural remedy for human narcissism. In 1872, when Nietzsche was only beginning his career, William Clifford had written that “the subject of science is the human universe, that is to say, everything that is, or has been, or may be related to man” (9). Clifford argues that scientific rationality can never purge itself of what he calls “imagery borrowed from human life.” Clifford recognizes that all scientific theorizing is a reflection of interests and should not seek to purge knowledge of narcissistic anthropocentrism. Clifford’s perspectivism recognizes the impossibility of purging science of all human interests implies, and that is
why he argues that we should fall back on procedural *a sensu communis* based upon intersubjective verifiability. Like John Stuart Mill, Clifford distinguishes between the private self and what Clifford calls the “tribal self” and its duties to the community of which it is a part. Clifford, as much as Matthew Arnold and (later) Freud, argues for a certain *culture* as an ersatz secular religion and a stay against “anarchy.”

This is what James is up against, and we get little indication of that from the lines he selectively quotes from Clifford. But the problems with James’s position are clear enough. James wants to argue from an ethical point of view that individuals have a right to believe according to their intuitions in the absence of evidence. However, this ethical distinction between private and public projects (which obviously owes something to Mill) is just where Clifford has the advantage. If we adopt Clifford’s distinction between the private and public (or “tribal”) self, then we could argue that individuals do have that right, just so long as we do not call it a “belief.” (Richard Rorty makes essentially this argument, as we shall see.) Clifford argues that our duty is not to some foundationalist “truth” conceived as independent of human wishes; he argues, rather, that we have a duty to others not to believe without evidence, because that would betray a sort of *social pact*. For Clifford, then, it is OK to have religious faith, so long as it is understood as meeting private emotional needs and not as a public *assertion of belief*. It is important to note that what Clifford argues for is a duty not to objective evidence, but our ethical obligation to others in our community, our duty to play our role in a social pact of intersubjective verifiability. The betrayal is not to truth, but to other people and to a social pact. It is also a betrayal of the agreement to separate the private project of wishes and desires from the public project of justified belief. The requirement that any hypothesis has to be verifiable is a procedural criterion, a procedure that binds a community and to which we adhere as a member of this community. For Clifford, it is *ethically* wrong to believe without evidence. The issue, then, is not truth versus error, but public versus private projects.

It is important, then, to acknowledge what is not radical in James’s thinking, particularly his early thinking. We are accustomed to talking about James as an anti-foundationalist, as rejecting a correspondence theory of truth. But Clifford, like Freud and like many positivists, assumes a conventionalist notion of scientific theorizing and Clifford’s positivist empiricism is quite explicit in its recognition that it is impossible to purge our theories of human interests – in other words, Clifford assumes along with the pragmatist that theories are instrumental and should be assessed not in terms of
their “fidelity” to reality or even in terms of evidence, but in terms of how well they “work.” Positivism is independent of philosophical skepticism, as James notes, because it has found a way to convert this “nervousness” about truth into a method that replaces the search for objective truth.

James later expressed his regret over the title “Will to Believe” (perhaps because of the Nietzschean association, but perhaps also because it so easily leant itself to parody – “The Will to Make-Believe” and such\(^{149}\). James preferred the title “The Right to Believe.” But James’s argument in terms of an ethics of belief puts him at a distinct disadvantage with regard to Clifford’s positivism as a form of “ethical nihilism.” James’s ethical defense of the validity and incommensurability of individual cases and experiences is an ethical strategy that fails here. We might say that James’s preoccupation with philosophical abstractions distracts him from considering the real problem of positivism as a religion, as an anti-philosophical form of nihilism. “Science herself,” James points out, alluding once again to Pascal,

consults her heart when she lays it down on that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man’s heart in turn declares. 

*(Pragmatism and Other Writings 212)*

This is all well and good, and James draws attention (as he has elsewhere) to the values that always underlie so-called “objective” pursuits. However, James’s demand here, that science must show how its love of technique that replaces the love of truth “bring[s] all sorts of other goods,” comes quite close to his own meliorist pragmatism. This is what Freud and Clifford aim to do in their moral arguments for science, and they arguably do a better job than James does (at this point in his thinking, at least). On the level of argument, then, “The Will to Believe” must be counted a failure. But it is an illustrative and instructive failure, making clear the limitations of taking Mill as one’s model for an ethical argument (for a *right* to believe) in response to the moral arguments of a Clifford or a Freud. Nietzsche, in short, was right in his

\(^{149}\) James was witness to the rapid spread of Nietzsche’s reputation in the 1890s (what was essentially his posthumous reputation).
refusal to engage these moral arguments on their own ground and to emphasize, as he did repeatedly, the incompatibility of social and moral standards with the more fundamental will to power.

Later philosophers have subsequently attempted to re-frame James’s critique so as to shore up his argument, or to imagine an entirely different argument in the same spirit and with the same thrust. Richard Rorty, a neo-pragmatist, seeks to overcome the problem of belief simply by dissolving the problem itself. What James should have argued for, Rorty claims, is a “right to romance” (96). In what Rorty calls his own “quasi-Jamesian position,” based on Rorty’s liberal-pragmatist values of “irony and solidarity,” we see something like a latter-day version of the private self as distinct from what Clifford called the “tribal self” (91). It is remarkably easy for Rorty to pick up on this Mill-side of James so as to make what is essentially an antifoundationalist version of Clifford’s argument (which, as I have noted, is already in an important sense antifoundationalist). Rorty’s advice to James is: “Do not worry too much about whether what you have is a belief, a desire, or a mood. Just insofar as such states as hope, love, and faith promote only such private projects, you need not worry about whether you have a right to have them” (91). Rorty thus takes the Mill influence seriously and translates James into those terms, seeing this as James’s real intention. According to Rorty, there is simply no need to argue on epistemological grounds for a right to something that is purely private and (by definition) poses no challenge to the values and standards that define the public sphere. Rorty in effect relegates the “aesthetic sphere” to the realm of private projects. And we might note, incidentally, that Rorty’s public/private version of anti-foundationalism is one that does not escape epistemic values:

When philosophy goes anti-foundationalist, the notion of “source of evidence” gets replaced by that of “consensus about what would count as evidence.” So objectivity as intersubjectivity replaces objectivity as fidelity to something nonhuman. The question “Is there any evidence for p?” gets replaced by the question “Is there any way of getting consensus on what would count in favor of p?” (91)
Rorty’s attempt to reformulate James’s argument thus does a good job of making the positivist’s case even more clear. But Rorty’s neo-positivist “private projects” argument fails to take seriously the problem of nihilism, the crisis of value, to which positivist values were meant to be a solution. Pascal’s appeal to the heart which has reasons of its own does not address the crisis of value and the disenchantment of modernity; rather, it is an early symptom of the crisis as a conceptual divide between value and preference, fact and feeling.

And so James’s confrontation with Clifford, like Woolf’s portrait of Ramsay, tells us something about the nature of the epistemic values that modernists were facing. I suggest that “The Will to Believe” actually demonstrates why we need a Nietzschean argument in place of Mill (or Rorty).\footnote{As another possible response to Clifford, James might have appealed instead to Mill’s critique of Carlyle. Mill simply asked why there should be “any virtue in industry.” In a notorious essay written in 1849, Carlyle had written in support of forced labor on plantations in Jamaica (following the abolition of slavery), arguing for the moral virtues of forced work over the free-market forces of supply and demand. In celebrating the virtues of duty and forced labor and the hierarchical control of the “captains of industry,” Carlyle was attacking the “dismal science” of laissez faire economics and not (as is sometimes thought) invoking it as a justification for a harshly pragmatic economic policy: “the Social Science ... which finds the secret of this Universe in supply and demand and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone ... is not a gay science ... it is a ... quite abject and distressing one; [it is] ... the dismal science.”}\footnote{See Gerald Myers 228 for more on James’s definition of “morbid” as emotion that obstructs thought, action, and/or communication. Myers does not make this point, but the criterion of communicability seems to anticipate some of Wittgenstein’s later concerns.} James’s own strategy in the following years, in response to his perceived failure in “Will to Believe,” was to relax his concern over the right to believe and to move some way toward Nietzsche’s position. And in spite of James’s continued emphasis on the singularity of individual experience, he cannot argue (as Rorty and Clifford do) for an ethical separation of public and private projects. For James, what we need is not a private project so much as an external object, something that has the “sound of reality” (as he puts it later in the “Sick Soul” chapter), something transpersonally available around which we can form our meaningful projects. One area where James and Freud do overlap is in their concept of “morbid” as that which is not in some way intersubjectively shareable as an equivalent to what Eliot called an “objective correlative.”\footnote{As another possible response to Clifford, James might have appealed instead to Mill’s critique of Carlyle. Mill simply asked why there should be “any virtue in industry.” In a notorious essay written in 1849, Carlyle had written in support of forced labor on plantations in Jamaica (following the abolition of slavery), arguing for the moral virtues of forced work over the free-market forces of supply and demand. In celebrating the virtues of duty and forced labor and the hierarchical control of the “captains of industry,” Carlyle was attacking the “dismal science” of laissez faire economics and not (as is sometimes thought) invoking it as a justification for a harshly pragmatic economic policy: “the Social Science ... which finds the secret of this Universe in supply and demand and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone ... is not a gay science ... it is a ... quite abject and distressing one; [it is] ... the dismal science.”} In Varieties of Religious Experience, James declares his method in the quiet but momentous move. “Because these are private experiences,” he writes, “I will make use of documents humains.” And he does. These personal testaments are not relegated to the merely expressive and subjective; they are treated as establishing valid forms of life. In the course of demonstrating this method,
James develops a different and much stronger case for the autonomy of aesthetic practices that model a certain kind of *attention to* fact as an alternative to “facts” in the epistemic sense and as an alternative and compelling source of value.

**Coda**

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer take note of positivist nihilism’s immunity to refutation by means of rational *argument*. “No matter what myths are invoked against it,” they write, “by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian” (4). Any new myth will either be instantly refuted *qua* myth, or subsumed within the self-annihilating logic of positivism and go the way of any scientific theory. This observation also echoes something of the spirit behind Francis Bacon’s call for the constant work of rejecting “any plausible, delectable, reverend or admired discourse, or any satisfactory arguments” in favor of “effecting and working.” This comes close, I believe, to explaining the failure of James’s argument in “Will to Believe.” I have been trying to show what a formidable opponent positivism was, that the epistemic values and dissociation of sensibility that generate the two distinct cultures actually encompasses *both* cultures (science and art), and why the problem of disenchantment demanded either a radically new empiricism or an entirely new concept of the aesthetic as a genuinely autonomous realm. The problem for art is its relevance within a disenchanted culture, where it is relegated to a symbiotic relationship with epistemic values and is therefore as powerless to challenge the dominance of that culture as it is to re-enchant a world of meaningless facts in a way that goes beyond merely projecting subjective values onto the world or making use of facts as the material for private fantasies.

The figure of Nietzsche has hovered in the background throughout this chapter, as a reminder of the problem we face and as exerting critical pressure on our possible solutions.\(^{152}\) Nietzsche shows that if we want to make a claim for the power of art as an *alternative* to these values, then we need to look at

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\(^{152}\) It is interesting to note that Nietzsche himself flirted with a version of positivism in the early 1880s, during a period in which he was one corner of a love triangle that involved none other than Lou Andréas Salome (who chose marriage with Nietzsche’s friend, the philosopher Paul Ree). The three posed for a humorously staged photo in which Nietzsche is shown pulling a chariot driven by Salome (an allusion to Plato’s chariot allegory in *Phaedrus*).
some other ways in which aesthetic articulation can discover those new values rather than simply give
individuals the “freedom” to pursue values that are made available by and fully comprehended within that
culture (which also offers the irony needed as a resource to cope with this disenchanted state of affairs).
In order to read Nietzsche the proto-modernist, however, we still need to look beyond the postmodern
Nietzsche that (like all misreadings) tells us something about the values and interests of a certain
historical moment. As a postmodern thinker, Rorty brings out the tension between the ideal of living one’s
life as a work of art, an aestheticism which owes at least something to Nietzsche,\footnote{\textit{Nietzsche: Life as Literature} by Alexander Nehamas is perhaps the most influential and representative
interpretation along these lines.} and the modernist search for transpersonal qualities of the object that might \textit{force} us to change our lives. (“Du muss dein Leben anderen,” as Rilke famously put it in “Archaic Torso of Apollo” – not the injunction: “you must pursue a project that is personally meaningful and gives you pleasure”). Like his “quasi-Jamesian”
position, Rorty gives us a postmodern Nietzsche freed from modernist drama and hang-ups.

Julia Kristeva is another contemporary philosopher who has re-purposed Nietzsche for a
postmodern account of melancholy overcome and transformed. In \textit{Black Sun: Depression and
Melancholia}, Kristeva argues that while it manifests itself differently in every epoch, melancholy is still in
some sense “transhistorical.” Modernist melancholy was generated by a sense of crisis over meaning.
We have now, apparently, moved beyond that moment:

\begin{quote}
[melancholy] writing is today confronted with the postmodern challenge ... the point now
is to see in the ‘malady of grief’ only one moment of the \textit{narrative synthesis} capable of
sweeping along in its complex whirlwind philosophical meditations as well as erotic
protections or entertaining pleasures. (258)
\end{quote}

Apart from the allusion to Nietzsche (“eternal return”), this picks up the language of Nietzsche as free play
among signs, but with little sense of what Nietzsche recognized was at stake. She writes of melancholy
itself as having a cyclical dynamic that generates new forms of expressive writing. \textit{Melancholy writes
itself}. The “challenge,” according to Kristeva, is merely to recognize grief as only one moment in the
natural cycle of seasonal alternation. Here is her account of the enjoyment of the pleasures afforded by
this new “amatory world” that comes to the surface once we submit to the dissolving force of shifting moods:

Following the winter of discontent comes the artifice of seeming; following the whiteness of boredom, the heartening distraction of parody. And vice versa. Truth, in short, makes its way amid the shimmering of artificial amenities as well as asserting itself in painful mirror images. Does not the wonderment of psychic life after all stem from those alternations of protections and downfalls, smiles and tears, sunshine and melancholia? (259)

*It is all part of life’s rich pageant*, we might be tempted to say in ironic paraphrase. Or, in a different mood, lines from T.S. Eliot might come to mind: “Wipe your hands across your mouth, and laugh / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots.” Kristeva’s notion of melancholy writing as “the pleasure of merely circulating” essentially puts us in the position of passive cloud-gazers.

Kristeva writes of “moments” in the “narrative synthesis” and new challenges to confront, but her account of the history of melancholy writing offers little hope, beyond therapeutic private projects, of altering the currents of history, or at least challenging the interests and values that have come to dominate at a given moment. Her own version of Nietzsche, moreover, now seems symptomatic of a moment in the past. The Nietzsche who called for the active creation of world-transforming values, the active embrace of one’s fate and not just submission to passing moods, is nowhere to be found in postmodern accounts like Rorty’s or Kristeva’s. In our “post-postmodern” period, we might view the interest in the Lacanian Real and so-called Return of the Real – the critical interest, for example, in *affect* as “pre-coded, pre-subjective force”¹⁵⁴ – as motivated in part by a dissatisfaction with the inadequacy (political and ethical) of the kind of postmodern aestheticism that Kristeva and Rorty and Nehamas outline. Our moment also makes clear (as has a century of Nietzsche scholarship) the eternally recurring need to re-visit Nietzsche and read him in relation to the problems he diagnosed and the experimental artistic endeavors he inspired. In the following chapters, I will look at some modernist attempts to

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¹⁵⁴ Brian Massumi’s definition in *Parables for the Virtual.*
overcome epistemic values, in addition to Nietzsche's, with particular attention to one mode of writing –
the essay – that has a special claim to experimental status within the history of melancholy writing.
Chapter Four: Emerson’s Problem with *Hamlet*

*The true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

*Only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world justified.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

*The problem with Hamlet is that it exists.*

Emerson

When he suggested that William James would have done better to affirm a “right to romance” instead of a right or a will to believe, Richard Rorty echoed a criticism he had made decades earlier in his review of Stanley Cavell’s *Claim of Reason*. Rorty’s chief complaint was that Cavell had failed (in the first half of the book, at least) to “take us from epistemology to romance” (“Cavell on Skepticism” 185). On both occasions, Rorty alludes to the memorable line with which Ralph Waldo Emerson concludes his 1842 essay “Experience,” the line that appears above as one of two epigraphs to this chapter. The second epigraph from Nietzsche, one of Emerson’s earliest and most avid readers, echoes the same line and is most likely alludes to it. Cavell would respond to Rorty’s criticism by pursuing a path in his thinking that had begun to take in the early 1970s. Over the following decades, Cavell would write a series of essays that read Emerson in connection with European thinkers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Cavell’s reading of Emerson was one philosopher’s attempt to overcome the mind-forged manacles of philosophy and its self-conscious preoccupations by following the example of experimental writing and taking one writer in particular as a model. Cavell was not the first philosopher for whom Emerson played this role; there are numerous lines throughout Nietzsche, in addition to the one quoted above, that Cavell identifies as “transfigurations” of earlier lines written by Emerson.

In Chapter Two, I looked at some attempts to “overcome epistemology,” the branch of philosophy that has been the foundation, or preoccupation, of the entire enterprise of philosophy itself since at least the time of Plato. In this chapter, I want to read Emerson’s “Experience” as an important document in this
effort to overcome epistemology, as well as an important document in the conceptual history of melancholy. From its opening sentence, coming to us in a voice which sounds like an abstract disquisition as well as a bewildered call from out of the wilderness – the essay opens with the starkly posed question, “Where do we find ourselves?” – to the famous concluding line, on the ideal of transforming genius into practical power, “Experience” attempts to take us from epistemology to romance: from the world as knowable and as an independent source of value, to a radical nihilism that has located another source of power and another measure of value. Emerson is explicit about this conversion experience. “I am ready to die out of nature,” he declares, “and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” (485). The question is how Emerson gets us there, and why there would be such a need to bring about a transvaluation of values in ourselves as well as in the culture in which we find ourselves.\(^\text{155}\) I will argue that there is an important connection between Emerson’s project of overcoming epistemology and his transformation of the concept of melancholy.\(^\text{156}\)

The radical implications of Emerson’s essay are easy to miss, however, particularly if we try to read it from a perspective defined by the kinds of philosophical concerns that Emerson tries so hard to replace.

The essay is notoriously complex and challenging from an interpretive standpoint. We face not only the question of how (or whether) Emerson effects a break from his earlier views, but must also determine the extent to which the essay ought to be read as philosophy or as literature (or as an attempt, as it was for Nietzsche and later for Cavell, to make literary performance take the place of traditional philosophical discourse). There is also the interpretive dilemma regarding its status as a personal essay – more specifically, the question of how we are supposed to interpret (and place within the context of the

\(^\text{155}\) A number of critics emphasize the therapeutic side of Emerson in relation to his role as a critic of the dominant culture, which contrasts somewhat with the stereotypical image of Emerson as the purveyor of a self-help philosophy (what we might call today the “Secret”) for how to live one’s life. Lawrence Buell, critic and Emerson biographer, was quoted in the Boston Globe as saying: “If you’re looking for strong guidance, look elsewhere. But if you’re looking for the courage to maintain sanity and resolution when the rest of society seems to have gone mad, Emerson may be your man.”

\(^\text{156}\) In his essay “Finding as Founding,” Cavell claims that in the earlier essay “Nature” (1836), Emerson still sees a possibility of refuting skepticism, while in “Experience,” Emerson recognizes that skepticism can only be “converted into a method.” (In “Declining Decline,” Cavell makes almost an identical claim about the difference between Wittgenstein’s early and later philosophy.) Emerson does not address the problem of philosophical skepticism, as such, at any point in “Experience.” And while I think Cavell is correct in reading the essay in a philosophical context, I will read philosophical skepticism in the wider and also more personal sense of “melancholy,” which Emerson explicitly calls (in the opening paragraph of “Experience”) the “noonday demon.” I thus want to place Emerson’s essay in both historical contexts, the question of overcoming skepticism within the larger discourse on melancholy.
rest of the essay) the highly personal but passing reference to the death of Emerson’s two-year-old son. I want to focus on one question in particular: How this most radical essay of Emerson’s anticipates what Steven Meyer calls “the writing methods of the early twentieth century” (emphasis added). The way to answer this question, I believe, is to highlight (as I will begin to do here) the significance of Emerson for the later thought of Nietzsche. I want to give special attention to the Nietzsche connection, because only want to arrive at some account of how Emerson’s concept of melancholy (his development of a post-melancholy thought) translates across the Atlantic and anticipates the experimental writing of the early twentieth-century avant garde. As I hope to show, this is not a simple story of overcoming epistemology in the sense of liberating oneself from the philosophical hang-ups that Rorty and others attribute to a European tradition of thinking.

Beginning with the famous Harvard Divinity School address, the document that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. called America’s “intellectual Declaration of Independence,” there is much throughout Emerson’s career that explicitly calls for (or at least entertains the possibility of) a complete liberation from the dead-weight of the Old World and its manufactured problems, a release from the oppressive burden of history itself and from the pressure within any culture (new or old) to conform to established standards. This “aversion to conformity”\(^\text{157}\) gives to all of Emerson’s writing its ministerial and therapeutic aim of showing others how to make an individual journey from illness into health, a recovery that makes possible the metaphorical “forgetting of a continent” (as Apollinaire would later put it). I want to focus here on a specific recovery effort: Emerson’s breaking free from the Romantic ideal of nature as a foundation or analogue for human value. This requires that we pay close attention to shifts within Emerson’s thinking as reflected in his writing. His declared readiness to “die out of nature” in “Experience,” for example, is likely a self-conscious allusion to his earlier essay “Nature.” Consider a key passage in “Spiritual Laws,” another relatively early essay, which still makes a Wordsworthian appeal to living one’s life according to the “way of nature” that he would (arguably) abandon entirely in “Experience”:

The intellectual life may be kept clean and healthful, if man will live the life of nature, and not import into his mind difficulties which are none of his. No man need be perplexed in

\(^{157}\) “The virtue most in request in society is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.” (“Self-Reliance”)
his speculations. Let him do and say what strictly belongs to him, and, though very ignorant of books, his nature shall not yield him any intellectual obstructions and doubts. Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination, and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man, - never darkened across any man's road, who did not go out of his way to seek them. These are the soul's mumps, and measles, and whooping-coughs, and those who have not caught them cannot describe their health or prescribe the cure. A simple mind will not know these enemies. It is quite another thing that he should be able to give account of his faith, and expound to another the theory of his self-union and freedom. This requires rare gifts. Yet, without this self-knowledge, there may be a sylvan strength and integrity in that which he is. "A few strong instincts and a few plain rules" suffice us. 

(Essays and Letters 314).

In this early essay, the "cure" he entertains is to "live the life of nature" – a residual romantic ideal. Nature is not a "friend" who never betrays the heart who loves her. But it can still serve as a model for living, even if we do not aspire to live in complete harmony with nature. The idea of nature as source of value and as a model for living an authentic life is still entertained as a possibility here – albeit an extremely tenuous one. A simple mind will not know these "enemies," but that is only due to the blessing of a limited experience. Most of us, however, are not leech gatherers; we read poems about people who lead simple lives close to the earth. We see some hints of the aboriginal/aristocratic fantasies here that we will see later in Emerson. If we do attain a post-lapsarian self-consciousness, what Hegel called "the unhappy consciousness," then it is still possible to develop a "new theory of self-union and freedom." Note, however, that this is not simple advice. We are almost, but not quite, to the point where Emerson is willing to acknowledge unambiguously, as his starting premise, that "it is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist ... [e]ver after, we distrust our instruments."

As the passage above also makes clear, the "difficulties" are imagined and unreal. The illness is unnatural and imported, a contemplative brooding upon man-made problems, a symptom of the unhappy consciousness. Emerson characterizes philosophical problems as (to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase) a
“bewitchment of our intelligence” by means of thought itself (or human language).\textsuperscript{158} But Emerson understands that life’s difficulties, however unreal, are also necessary limitations to embrace and convert into opportunities for realizing one’s power in relation to the world. We thus see intimations of Nietzsche’s \textit{amor fati}, and we also get a sense of how the fatalistic embrace of obstacles might work within a self-reflexive project of \textit{Selbstgestaltung}, Nietzsche’s term for the process of giving form to oneself by testing and tapping into one’s powers. (It was Emerson’s essay “Fate,” in particular, that Nietzsche reportedly re-read every year). In “Experience,” Emerson expounds what he calls a new “theory of one’s self-union and freedom,” a theory that must be put into practice and which requires “rare gifts.” This passage is replete with Nietzschean themes, and the thematic concerns (not to mention intertextual relations) between Nietzsche and Emerson are often so tightly integrated as to be more than question of “influence.” At times, Nietzsche reads almost like a gloss upon Emerson.

The “measles and mumps” being “ministerial to a higher good” seems to anticipate Nietzsche’s well-known boast that “what does not kill me only makes me stronger.” But Emerson considers the possibility that \textit{not} being aware of these difficulties, \textit{not} being an unhappy consciousness and instead being a simple soul, is a possibility. Naïve and sentimental pastoral, etc.. The contrast between “what is known from experience,” etc. is just as complex as the contrast between health/illness and culture/nature are already complex, as is the notion of what Schiller called naïve and sentimental pastoral. These two notions would also become important to Nietzsche’s distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian. Realizing the power of genius in this self-reflexive way is what Nietzsche would call the activity of \textit{Selbstgestaltung} – giving form to one’s self, which requires a constant tension between the Apollonian creative giving of form to and the Dionysian force that exceeds and unmakes established forms – or what Emerson in “Experience” calls simply the interplay between “power” and “form” (481).

We also see in this passage the earliest hints of a transition from Romantic appeal to nature to a radically self-reflexive nihilism – the strength and integrity in that which he is, which modulates from the ideal of self-reliance to what Emerson calls (once again, in “Experience”) the ideal of “self-trust” and appealing to one’s “own facts.” In “Experience,” Emerson rephrases this question of why we make an

\textsuperscript{158} Elsewhere in “Experience, Emerson writes that “the whole frame of things preaches indifference. Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy.”
effort to import and manufacture difficulties that are not natural and not real, to the wider question of why
it is human nature to “court suffering” to win a sense of reality as well as a sense of nature as having
objective value. And the new source of value comes not from “the way of nature” (where he declares that
“all things preach indifference”) and reformulate self-reliance and self-union into the self-reflexive activity
of “the world exists to realize the practical power of genius...”. In the passage above, Emerson sounds as
if he is counseling “young people” on how to avoid despair induced by skepticism (“doubts”, etc.). One of
the epistemological questions that is raised by “Experience” is how, if Emerson abandons the idea of
nature as a source of value, we might think of the relationship between skepticism and naturalism.\textsuperscript{159} The
possibility of some form of naturalism also raises questions about what Emerson famously called “the
method of nature” and how it might serve as a model for experimental writing, if not necessarily a model
for living one’s life.

The complex relationship between Emerson and Nietzsche demands a book-length treatment,
not a brief chapter.\textsuperscript{160} I am primarily interested here in the way Emerson, and Nietzsche’s
“transfiguration” of Emerson’s thought, prefigures experimental modernist writing. One curious obstacle
to this endeavor is the standard account of modernism put forth by recent Emerson critics, who (like Rorty
in his reading of Nietzsche) tend either to ignore or downplay the crisis narrative and the sense of specific
cultural problems that motivated these experiments. As Richard Rorty illustrates, part of what we
overcome is the modernist drama of the overcoming itself – the original stakes involved in overcoming
epistemology, and the challenge of finding other values to take its place. These various readings by
Emersonian critics, for all their emphasis on context and contingency, also ignore the period-specific
context that would explain why artists would want to engage in experimental writing in the first place and
develop such methods (apart from the will to innovate and make it new). In one of the founding texts of
recent Emersonian criticism, Poirier goes so far as to characterize modernism itself as little more than a

\textsuperscript{159} See Chapter One of Paul Grimstad’s recent Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary
Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses, which argues that naturalism is an alternative to skepticism.
Grimstad highlights the passage in “Experience” where Emerson writes that “the world itself is a bubble of
skepticism” and thus seems to suggest some form of naturalism as an alternative to skepticism. My
reading of the essay sees Emerson seeking a quite different alternative, one that clearly anticipates
Nietzsche’s aestheticism.

\textsuperscript{160} To date, there have been two major book-length studies on the relationship (Stack, and more recently
Mikics).
self-serving public relations move devised by American poets (the chief engineers being T.S. Eliot and Pound) who fall outside the tradition of Emerson’s truly innovative and American model of experimental writing.\textsuperscript{161} Emerson, the avant-gardist \textit{avant la lettre}, thus renders almost unnecessary the very idea of a historically specific avant-garde. Emerson, of course, speaks metaphorically of a "new yet unapproachable America," and this can give us license to treat European artists and thinkers as (at best) engaged in a parallel development or manifesting indirectly the influence of the sage of Concord. The Emersonian critical paradigm also tends to treat these American artists as disciples and heirs who simply \textit{elaborate on} Emerson’s radical and experimental thought in a programmatic way (rather than conducting real experiments of their own based on different programs). The same canon of almost exclusively American writers reappears in the chapter titles of various studies, and it easy to read these writers as elaborating on Emerson’s thought as establishing not only a declaration of independence but also something of a charter statement for more than a century of experimental activity.\textsuperscript{162}

I believe reading Emerson this way tends to obscure what is truly radical in his thought and what connects him with the avant-garde practices he is said to anticipate. It is true that Emerson appealed to Nietzsche in part because he promised a way out of European problems and what Nietzsche called “cloudy, moist, melancholy old Europe.” Emerson appealed to Nietzsche because he showed him the way to overcome the weight of history and culture in Europe. But we should not forget the context that explains why such aspirations would have had the appeal they did for Nietzsche and for his contemporaries. I therefore want to argue that Emerson’s transformation of melancholy is best understood \textit{within} a European context (rather than as an escape from European problems). In Chapter Five, I will try to show how Nietzsche is in many respects the ultimate Emersonian, and also one way of appreciating Emerson’s historical connection with avant-garde writing practices (in Europe, as well as in America). Nietzsche is a European thinker who adapts Emerson’s thought, rather than simply elaborating on it, in an effort to deal with cultural problems that Emerson either did not fully appreciate or were to

\textsuperscript{161} See Chapter Two of \textit{The Renewal of Literature}, titled “Modernism and its Difficulties.”

\textsuperscript{162} In addition to Poirier’s \textit{Renewal of Literature} and Grimstad’s recent study, the long list might also include Jonathan Levin’s \textit{Poetics of Transition} (which I discuss in Chapter Two), Steven Myer’s \textit{Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science}; and Joan Richardson’s \textit{A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling}. Stanley Cavell has distanced himself from pragmatist and radical empiricist readings, but his influence on recent Emersonian criticism of all stripes is nevertheless pervasive.
become far more acute only in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In recent years, Nietzsche’s
debt to Emerson has received some new scholarly attention and is now more widely acknowledged and
understood. But the connection is all too often discussed in terms of Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche
or as an early anticipation of his later thinking. I want to look specifically at how Nietzsche developed and
altered Emerson’s thinking to effect a break from the problems he understood to be culturally
symptomatic.

The disenchantment of modernity is an important world-historical context for reading Emerson,
and it is an assumed though mostly unexamined context for Emersonian critics. Poirier notes that
Emerson’s dream of genius is “to know a world without knowing it as a text” (Renewal 210). This
suggests a parallel with Benjamin’s account of Baroque allegory and his description of Baroque
melancholy (“mournfulness,” or Trauer) as the “sensibility in which feeling revives the empty world in the
form of a mask, in order to take a puzzling pleasure in its sight” (qtd. in Pensky 90). In “Experience,”
Emerson will deal more directly with this “puzzle” of taking pleasure in a vision of the world as text or
mask, as well as the peculiar strategy of seeking to “revive the empty world” through the courting of pain
and immersing oneself in a melancholy contemplation of the idea of loss. Joan Richardson is a recent
Emersonian critic who emphatically reads Emerson as “carrying out the Protestant project,” thus reading
him in a European context, though not within Benjamin’s or Weber’s disenchanted narrative. “The
continuing work of the Reformation,” Richardson writes, “required ongoing iconoclasm, getting rid of
verbal icons still remaining after the destruction of idols and graven images” (112). And Richardson, like
many other Emersonian critics, reads this continuing work in exceptionalist terms, as a distinctly American
project, claiming that those who made the journey and arrived in the strange New World – what Emerson
called “this new, yet unapproachable America” – were forced by this new context to deal with the
experience of becoming “lost among signs” as the “prerequisite to reform” (ix).

In contrast with these exceptionalist accounts, I will argue that “Experience” occupies an
important place within the much wider history of transformations of melancholy and within European
narrative of the disenchantment of modernity. Emerson should be read as a part of that history, not as an

163 See, for example, the special Emerson/Nietzsche issue of ESQ: A Journal of the American
Renaissance (Volume 43, nos. 1-4, 1997) which contains contributions from many of the leading scholars
who began to study the connection in the 1990s (around the time when George Stack’s first book-length
study of Nietzsche and Emerson appeared).
exception to it, and nowhere is Emerson’s relation to the European context more clear than in his attempt to overcome the problem of a disenchaned melancholy by transforming it into a method. There are two specific European contexts I want to highlight in which the significance of Emerson’s transformation of melancholy appears most clearly. One important context in which to read Emerson is within the early modern history of melancholy and a narrative of the disenchantment of modernity (a modernist narrative, not a specifically Weberian one). The other important context is to read Emerson as overcoming the epistemic values in Wordsworthian Romanticism and as developing (long before Nietzsche) a post-romantic aesthetic. And the best way to do that is to read “Experience” alongside one of the archetypal documents of Romanticism that outlines one disenchaned narrative of loss and recovery.

1. Emerson’s “Experience” as a Post-Romantic Text

As many critics have noted, Emerson’s mid-period essay (first published in 1842) represents a major turning point in his thought and also reflects (and refers to) a traumatic event that was a turning point in Emerson’s personal life. In a brief but memorable passage of the essay, Emerson relates his personal response to the death of his two-year-old son, Waldo. From a biographical point of view, then, it invites comparison with Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas,” a meditation written in response to the death of Wordsworth’s brother, the middle-period poem that is often seen as a turning point in Wordsworth’s career and (by some) as a renunciation of his earlier poetics that marks the beginning of the “slow, sad music of infirmity” of Wordsworth’s later poetry. This is an oversimplified reading, of course, and Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode has also been (mis)read as a disillusionment and turning point, the later “Elegiac Stanzas” having the advantage of a specific life-crisis around which to construct such a reading. Emerson’s essay invites a similarly narrow biographical interpretation. In order to highlight what makes “Experience” such an important turning point in the development of a post-Romantic aesthetic, I want to contrast two concepts of melancholy by reading Emerson’s essay alongside a different Wordsworth text -- the well-known passage in Book VI of Prelude that narrates Wordsworth’s failed experience of crossing the Alps without even realizing it (as his guide informs him):
Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost; (lines 591-595)

This experience of disappointment over his failure to experience, and his reflection upon the disparity between what he imagines and what he actually sees, leads Wordsworth to a strange version of one of his many hymns to the power of the imagination and to the capacity of the mind to communicate with nature (this is all taken from the later and somewhat revised 1850 edition):

The melancholy slackening that ensued
Upon those tidings by the peasant given
Was soon dislodged. Downwards we hurried fast,
And, with the half-shaped road which we had missed,
Entered a narrow chasm. The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy strait,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow pace. The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls…
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (lines 619-640)
This entire episode in the Prelude – a celebration of the imagination that takes flight from a failure of the imagination -- has long puzzled critics. One critic has called it a “logical failure” (Miall 87). In fact, it is very much in the pattern of Wordsworth’s cycle of expectation and disappointment – our contact with the life of things is a function of their alienation from us and our disappointment. In this passage, we thus see the dialectical recuperation of things in their radical otherness, as well as an odd celebration – and what seems to many a contradictory and “illogical” celebration – of the power of the imagination to commune with things as the symbolic testimony of this power. In the poem, the slowness and the melancholy slackening allow the poet to recover his contact with natural objects and thus gives a new spin to the famous phrase (from "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey") on seeing “into the life of things” [my italics]. Idealism and realism are thus two sides of the same coin, both manifestations of epistemic values. Wordsworth stages a disconnect between the imagination and fact so as to recuperate the relationship, thus demonstrating the relationship between idealism and realism as twin manifestations of epistemic values. So Wordsworth entertains a melancholy method of recovering meaning dialectically, on the road to the object as disclosed through an uncanny encounter (akin to Benjamin’s “profane illumination”). Wordsworth goes from seeing into the life of things and from a proto-Proustian project of emotion recovered and memory regained in tranquility, to something more like a proto-Surrealist recovery of things in their uncanny alterity – as nature morte. A “melancholy slackening” of the subjective will makes possible the lyric subject’s uncanny encounter with things, as well as allowing us to recuperate our imaginative power to commune with them.

Many critics have found Wordsworth’s strategy more than a little suspect, but one could hardly imagine a more vivid illustration of the Romantic celebration of the power of imagination. But there is also a hint of Benjamin’s materialist recuperative method here. We might recall Wordsworth’s odd lament in the preface to Lyrical Ballads that the poet must give pleasure to his readers and “except this one restriction, there is no object standing between the Poet and the image of things.” One natural question to ask about this dialectic of expectation and disappointment is whether Wordsworth “engineers” this failure, or at least welcomes it as an occasion for communing with nature. If we cannot will our own epiphanies, then we can still engineer sublime failures of the imagination so as to recuperate a sense of
the alterity of nature as meaningless but objective fact. This is a curious reversal of the Romantic view of nature as a source of value and as having a special correspondence with the power of imagination.

Critic Charles Altieri draws special attention to this passage of the Prelude as an illustration of how "value for the Romantics was conceived as an extension of fact and hence a fulfillment of epistemic culture rather than a challenge to its authority" (Stevens 14). As I hope to show, Emerson’s essay outlines a model of responding to epistemic disenchantment that has far more profound implications. Emerson overcomes romanticism by rejecting its remaining epistemic aspirations (the idea that the “facts” of nature can be the source and foundation for value). Instead of leading to the “slow, sad music of infirmity,” Emerson’s essay offers a blueprint for a new form of post-Romantic heroic melancholy that Nietzsche would later popularize as an important model for the perpetual revolution of the modernist avant-garde. Harold Bloom famously claimed that Emerson did not have Wordsworth’s patience and had no interest in waiting passively the epiphanic visions to come; instead, Emerson wanted to force these epiphanies to occur through the subject’s active interrogation of the object world. Bloom is not entirely correct, however, in his contrast between Emerson and Wordsworth. Emerson’s ideal is not the “flash-of-lightning faith” in the epiphany at all; his desire is to maintain what he calls a “continuous daylight.”

The phenomenon of the conversion, a type of experience to which Emerson gave a central place, is therefore not to be equated with the profane illumination of the epiphany. He is, moreover, quite explicit in “Experience” in declaring the impossibility of an unmediated knowledge of things as they really are (noumena, as distinct from phenomena). By the time we come to “Experience,” Emerson has fundamentally rejected Wordsworth’s desire for empirical fact, as well as the Wordsworthian celebration of the imagination as a power of communing with the things of the world, the power to apprehend things — rocks, and stones, and trees — in their material otherness and in light of their radical indifference to our interests. The famous passage from Wordsworth thus illustrates two approaches that Emerson will reject: a celebration of the power of the imagination (idealism), and a realism of the material object with which we may restore an unmediated contact. We will now look at how Emerson charts a different path down the mountain.

164 “I wish to exchange this flash-of-lightning faith for a continuous daylight.” (The line appears in the 1842 essay “The Transcendentalist”).
The first sentence we read in “Experience” is a Cartesian-sounding question that has the disarming effect of seeming to come from nowhere: “Where do we find ourselves?” We become lost in the company of Wordsworth; in Emerson, we are lost from the beginning. All the reader encounters is this disembodied voice, and we face an urgent but unanswerable question even before we find an opportunity to ask who is talking, before we to orient ourselves as readers in relation to the voice of our interlocuter. There is no narrative framework, no visible scene into which we are thrown. We are then given some narrative context, though a meager dose of it. And it is all hypothetical context. We are told, in a paratactic sequence of descriptions, to imagine that we find ourselves “on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.” Just as we begin to get our bearings in this surreal but hypothetical vision, we are informed that this dreamlike scene is one in which we have somehow awakened to find ourselves. There is no view to take in from these abstract and unnatural heights, only a sense of our basic coordinates and a vague sense of having ascended to a position on these stairs. And even these basic coordinates do not station us very securely as participants in what has now become a thought experiment. We are on a stair, one of a mere succession of stairs with no visible end and no beginning. Nor can we extrapolate with any certainty a trajectory or intended goal from an internal sense of momentum or from preceding steps that we can trace; we only “seem” to have ascended.

The language then modulates to a more conventional and “grounded” mode of address: that of the philosophical disquisition. Adopting the voice of the moraliste and observer of customs, Emerson begins to speculate on the nature of the human longing for touchstones of reality, observing the odd way in which grief and suffering are “courted” in the interests of a philosophical realism as well as idealism (loss and distance serving to intensify the sense of depth and meaning):

People grieve and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all
the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers. Was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. (472-73)

The casually interjected question (consider what happens tonally if we change to: "Was it not Boscovich who found…?") affirms that we are reading an essay, a loosely discursive mode far from the tonal range of Wordsworth’s language. But Emerson’s paragraph is anything but unstructured: it performs an astonishing amount of thematic exposition within the space of a brief passage. These are themes that will be developed later in the essay. The paragraph establishes, among other things, that Emerson is dealing with distance and loss in the sense of “object relations” more generally – the possibility of “souls” coming into contact with each other, as well as making contact with the “things we aim at and converse with.” Emerson opens the paragraph with another gesture characteristic of the essay mode, once again in the voice of the moraliste of manners and customs: “[w]hat opium is instilled into all disaster!” Emerson here identifies both idealism and realism – the longing for contact with reality, for the “image of things,” and the notion that such unmediated contact with the true “image of things” is possible – as twin philosophical illusions. “Grief too will make us idealists us,” he writes, and the “too” should be read as well as realists. Both philosophical orientations manifest an epistemic desire for the real that Emerson suggests is fundamentally misguided.

In this early passage, coming only three paragraphs into the essay, we get our first hints of unsettling speculations about (for example) the “price” we are willing to pay – a son or a lover – for an authentic experience and for something that will bring us closer to “reality.” But this still does not prepare us for the sudden and startling reference to the recent loss of his two-year-old son Waldo in the following paragraph (a disclosure that is tucked away within the paragraph, without even a break for a new paragraph that would draw attention to its significance):
In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, — neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caduceous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. (473)

If critics are puzzled by Wordsworth’s logic of a staged failure of the imagination as a pretext for celebrating the power of the imagination, then the source of puzzlement in “Experience” – what puts off many readers, in fact – is this notoriously sudden and almost casual mention made of the recent loss of a son (who is not mentioned again in the essay) that appears so incongruously in the context of scattered musings on philosophical questions. Equally disconcerting is the way Emerson characterizes this profound loss by appealing to scientific metaphors analogies to economic investment and the loss of an “estate.” When Freud declares that “transience value is scarcity value over time,” he is making a claim in the course of elaborating a general theory, and so the analogy is therefore acceptable. Freud is not writing about the loss of a two-year-old boy. But when Emerson confesses his grief over the fact that grief can teach him nothing, and when he suggests that such knowledge and such contact with reality is something “we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers,” then the effect is obviously quite different.

In contrast to Wordsworth, Emerson does not narrate his experience of this loss or stage for us his disappointment. Rather, he imagines a hypothetical response to an imagined situation: “If tomorrow I should be informed...” Emerson is concerned here with how we view loss and find meaning in it; his aim is not to represent the experience of loss but to reflect on how we find meaning in loss. Note also the complicated way in which Emerson relates his personal experience of loss (his own inability to find the contact with reality he is looking for) by analogy with other people’s experiences – the question being not whether the responses of other people’s responses to loss are sincere or whether they pretend to feel
more sadness than there is cause to experience. This is not a question of authentic feeling, of accurately representing deep feelings; the problem is with our notion of authenticity itself, with the opposition between “surface” and reality – seeing into the life of things by means of death and the experience of loss. Emerson grieves that grief can teach him nothing – which would otherwise come close to sounding like an arrogant boast, if Emerson were critiquing the sincerity of his feeling as compared with the feelings of others (as he did at the beginning of this paragraph). But Emerson is personal in just the right places: “I cannot get it nearer to me.” In context, this is a poignant statement of his desire to have contact with his son as well as the admission of its impossibility. He cannot do it, and he submits that there is a problem, a more general problem, with wanting to. What seems to be a casual exploitation of the personal experience of the loss of his son is actually part of a more general critique of the way we court suffering and exploit distance and loss – what will make idealists and realists of us all.

The reader may begin to suspect whether Emerson is invoking the loss of his son as a mere pretext for philosophizing on loss. But the timing of this personal revelation is everything here. In the long passage leading up to his first mention of the loss of his son, Emerson questions our self-deceiving search for meaning in loss. One of the philosophical questions he addresses is how our feeling that there is meaning in loss and distance, our idealizing of deep authentic feeling itself, is itself an exploitative move and “scene-painting and counterfeit.” Emerson alternates carefully between relating a personal experience and offering general speculations about human nature. The successful balancing of these two tasks (and I think it is handled plausibly and successfully) depends on the precise timing of the alternation, and on the decision to abandon the topic of Waldo’s death at the moment it has raised the questions it is intended to raise. The “most unhandsome part of our condition,” as Emerson puts it, is not the fact that we must lose what we love, but rather the fact that we actively “court loss” and feel the need to interpret and attribute meaning to loss. The irony, as Emerson appreciates, is that the reality of things slips away from us the more we desire contact and seek to exploit that distance as a license for imaginative indulgence:

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.
Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy. Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual. (473)

The “casualness” is clearly a pun, and we might also note Emerson’s casually dismissive attitude toward certain questions. We see an explicit grappling with an epistemic problem: “We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediatelty, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects.” Perhaps, perhaps: Emerson dismisses these philosophical concerns, this philosophical skepticism, as a pointless exercise – he seems to be asking, do these philosophical questions really matter? What he really dismisses is not the memory of his son, but the obsessive (and epistemic) desire to represent what cannot be represented, or (as a condition of experience) what cannot even be experienced directly. There is another pun here, or at least an ambiguity, that will be developed as a motif in the essay, and that is the shift from “relations” to objects to our relations to each other (in the sense of “our friends and relations.”) Emerson’s ideal of individual self-reliance in “Experience,” we shall see, is a radically self-reflexive solipsism that rigorously rejects any notion of recognition by, or sympathy, for other people. And Emerson, like Nietzsche, conceives of this dependent “relation to others” in epistemic terms. Later in the essay, he uses “relative” in the spatial sense of a frame of reference, declaring that “the great and crescive self, rooted in absolute nature, supplants all relative existence.”

I want to suggest that “Experience” goes far beyond Wordsworth and really does “challenge the authority of epistemic culture.” Note that Emerson is going beyond Freud in rejecting both the poet’s indulgence in melancholy as a way of communing with reality as well as the “paltry empiricism” of the scientist. Both seek to interpret meaning, both want to explain surface in terms of depth, both want to see the general in the particular. Note his rejection of the epistemic values underlying both imagination and science. But the problem is not just scientific models of explanation, but with the desire to explain at all. We are also talking about explanation, interpretation, and knowing the world more generally. Note the
passages in which Emerson rejects theorizing and the reading of meaning into signs (like phrenology). Signs are taken for wonders. This suggests a more general problem with interpreting meaning, with viewing the world as text. Emerson rejects the synthetic powers of the imagination as well as the empirical scientist’s interpretations of “fact.”

The point here is not that “the absence of the imagination must also be imagined,” as Wallace Stevens famously wrote, which may easily be interpreted as following a familiar Romantic negative dialectic and a pretext for another Wordsworthian celebration of the imagination. What we face, rather, is the necessity of willing and holding hard to the poverty that forces the imagination to recognize the way the world resist our designs. For Emerson, it is impossible to imagine the world as seen without us – imagination of this kind (“imaging”) is an illusion. The challenge for Emerson, as I hope to show, is how we find some way to acknowledge the pressure of reality, some constraints, without making it the real source or test of value in the epistemic sense. “Nature and literature,” Emerson laments, “are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast” (487). So what is left then, we might wonder, once we have cast off both empirical science and the imagination, the philosophical abstraction as well as the sensuous and material reality of nature? “The great and crescive self” is still “rooted in absolute nature,” but the crescive self and its own activity of transforming transience into a power in relation to the world are taken as the primary source of value (487). The question then becomes how value derives from the process of engaging the world and articulating oneself, and what kinds of activity we are talking about. And if we are looking in Emerson for a model of modernist experimental writing, then we need to know what role the experimental activity of aesthetic articulation has in this new process of value creation.

If there is a central “topic” to be found in “Experience,” it is the concept mood and its relation to individual temperament. It is in “Experience,” for example, that we find the well-known conceit on mood being the beads and temperament the iron wire on which the beads slide. Here, quoted in full, is perhaps the key passage on mood and temperament:

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses
which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man, whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism. The more or less depends on structure or temperament. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung. Of what use is fortune or talent to a cold and defective nature? (473-74)

What is the relation between mood and temperament, the one a perspective that distorts our perception of the world and the other a means of dissolving the subject position itself as our vantage point on the world? Temperament here is analogous to epistemic perspective (always limited, always biased, always subjective – and that applies to the poet’s point of view, as well as the scientist’s). Mood is the solvent that helps us overcome our temperamental limitations; it “dissolves personality.” We cannot know the world apart from our limited perspectives, which are a function of our shifting moods and given temperaments; “from the mountain we see the mountain.” Imagination is “scene painting and counterfeit.” Note the emphasis above on visual perspective above – the sunset we see, the book – bringing to mind, and perhaps an intended allusion to, Galileo’s declaration that “nature is a book open for all to read.” We cannot experience mood directly, and temperament is a perspectival limitation. The problem is not representing grief per se, but the way mood and temperament challenge representational values more generally.

Here, then, is one way of answering the traditional question of what the central essay is really “about.” The two ways of understanding the world (through feeling and through intellect) are both dismissed as limited perspectives. The question about locating a center in the essay is not a question about place of Emerson’s personal loss and grief in relation to the rest of the essay, but rather about the relation of grief as one example of a mood that can be experienced (though not directly). “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing,” but for Emerson mood or temperament have no power to “teach” us anything

about the world; they have only the power to dissolve and reconstitute worlds for us. “Our moods do not agree with one another,” and the fact that moods occur to us gives them (for Emerson) an objective status that replaces the fixation on objective knowledge of reality that haunts the philosophical skeptic. But our job then is not to submit to them passively, but rather to use them to dissolve personality (mood dissolves temperamental limitations – note the shift from the wire metaphor to the even more abstract axis in the later passage.) We must rely on our positional axis, and we do not even have the vertical coordinates of the stairs by which we can take our bearings relative to the world (much less treat it as any kind of absolute frame of reference). In Chapter Five, I will look in more detail at how Emerson’s concept of mood (elaborated in a non-theoretical, non-doctrinal way in “Experience”) gets translated into Nietzsche’s Selbstgestaltung and his concept of aesthetic articulation as value creation.

I would go further and say that the fundamental problem for Emerson is not our inability to experience grief, or to experience the truth of things by way of grief; the problem is with the epistemic notion of experience itself. Mood becomes important because it is inimical to experience, because it disarms our epistemic interest in “deep meaning” or “authentic contact.” In effect, Emerson wants to effect a transvaluation of values by converting an epistemic sense of transience into the force of transition. The danger here of conflating transition with transience is great. Emerson is not making a Heraclitean claim about the transience of the things of this world so much as he is noting how all of our knowledge claims are functions of mood/temp. “Experience” thus demonstrates the inadequacy of experience in the epistemic sense – the inadequacy of both immediate fact and immediate feeling – and affirms the primacy of mood and temperament. The problem is not with the representability of grief, but with the impossibility of representing mood more generally. Mood and temperament are primary, not the experience they frame. And if mood is primary and cannot be represented, then representation (and the epistemic notion of the real as what can be represented) ought to be abandoned. Emerson investigates the connection between feeling a loss and knowing the world through loss (which is reflected in the two-parts of the essay). One response is to treat loss and death and transience themselves as touchstones for the real: “Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us.” But this is one of many positions that Emerson rejects. Emerson
gives an anatomy of melancholy here as the fundamentally epistemic temptation to equate reality with the pain of loss: reality is what hurts.

We thus see the central place of mood as an abstract force, a force abstracted from “matter,” a disembodied Cartesian force that has no “location” and replaces the disengaged subject with a disengaged force – a force of dissolution: “Where do we find ourselves?” is also an ambiguously worded practical question about how we find our selves placed at any moment if our relation to the world (and our selves) is a function of these changing moods. In place of the objective “force” of nature, Emerson sees practical value in subjective mood as a solvent and a catalyst within a program of self-formation. The objectivity of mood, as something that happens to us and effects a transformation of the frame that conditions our experience, thus comes to replace the longing for the hard reality of the material world as a reliable (but in fact always unreliable) test of reality. The opposition between experience and meaning gets replaced in Emerson by an opposition between experience and the framing of experience. And the framing of experience takes primacy over what we experience in the world – which, as Emerson repeatedly reminds us in “Experience,” is always colored by our mood and our temperament. Richard Poirier’s remark that Emerson’s dream of genius is “to know a world without knowing it as a text” may point to a parallel with Benjamin’s project. But Emerson’s comment that he would like to know the world if that were possible sounds like the voice of someone who has simply renounced the skeptic’s concern for knowledge – or, as Stanley Cavell suggests, someone who has converted skepticism into a method. This is the Emerson whom Nietzsche praised as “contain[ing] so much skepticism, so many ‘possibilities,' that even virtue achieves esprit in his writings” (Basic Writings 795). The conversion of skepticism into a method involves converting fact into possibility.

Here is a summing up of these themes and a concise articulation of what I take to be the radically anti-epistemic position of “Experience”:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount
of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast.

(487)

This is one of the most Nietzschean-sounding passages in all of Emerson and one to which we ought to pay particular attention before looking at what Nietzsche “does” with Emerson. Once again, Emerson repeats the observation that nature and literature are projective fictions, both “subjective phenomena.” But Emerson anticipates Nietzsche most clearly here in sounding a note of urgency and even a sense of ominousness about the threat of nihilism, and what Nietzsche would describe as the “terrible demands” it places on us. What “new power” is this that Emerson identifies? Here it is characterized as a force unleashed, as something inimical and indifferent to our interests. Nihilism is a discovery that is “too late to be helped,” and now it represents a challenge we must face. Emerson deserves the title of the first post-romantic (something often said of Nietzsche) in part because he is the first to fully appreciate the threat of nihilism and one of the first to recognize disenchanted science (the “paltry empiricism” of his day) and the Romantic concept of the imagination as twin manifestations of the disenchantment of modernity, and to conclude that neither was up to the challenge of dealing with the deep crisis of value and meaning in Western culture.

3. On Two Freudian Readings of “Experience"

Any reader of “Experience” is forced at some point (usually very early on, as the passage in question appears early in the essay) to address a basic and troubling question: How do we reconcile the personal component of the essay, the death of Emerson’s son, with its more general significance? Is the essay “about” grieving loss, or about overcoming epistemology? Among critics, there is general agreement about the basic form of the essay: The first part of the essay demonstrates the failure of felt experience, and the second demonstrates the failure to understand experience intellectually. These are
both questions of contact with or access to “reality,” and are thus epistemic in nature. Both deal with the values of knowing the world. Many critics have been puzzled over why Emerson abandons the subject of Waldo completely in the second half of the essay, and by the fact that Waldo seems to be subsumed within a larger argument. One simple response would be to point out that there is no larger argument in the essay. Emerson considers and abandons a variety of possibilities in a discursive, essayistic way. There is no obvious “climax” to the essay, no dramatic arc, no elegiac working through. Emerson thus escapes the traditional problem that has always attached to the elegy of making a personal loss (the death of someone) the occasion of a public ritual of mourning and a dialectical affirmation of larger powers renewed or awakened (which we see in Wordsworth’s affirmation of the power of the imagination). Emerson makes different “use” of this experience, as we have seen, by meditating on the failure to experience loss itself and the failure of grief to teach him anything, and the consequent impossibility to construct any recovery narrative from what he is unable to experience. “Experience” can be read as either an experimental elegy of some kind, or (just as plausibly) as the ultimate anti-elegy. I want to look at two of the most influential readings of “Experience” in recent decades, both of which characterize the process of Emerson’s concept of experimental writing (as well as his own writing) within the very different framework of Freud’s mourning/melancholia distinction. I want to suggest that the ease with which critics invoke the Freudian framework not only fails to appreciate the full implications of Emerson’s concept of melancholy for experimental writing, but is also a sign of the continued dominance of the epistemic culture whose values Emerson (and Nietzsche) sought to replace.

Sharon Cameron is one critic who argues that the figure of little Waldo is at the center of the essay, that remains a presence throughout the essay even when he is no longer explicitly mentioned, and that his abandonment as a topic within the larger structure of the essay is evidence of a new mode of representing grief and a new form of elegiac mourning. The confusion over the central subject of the essay, Cameron observes, has led critics to downplay the loss of Emerson’s son and its importance within the essay: “If [critics] do see the death of the child as central,” she writes, “they have viewed it as the first of a number of phenomena to which Emerson has an equally contingent relation rather than understanding its generative connection to all else that follows” (31). Cameron wants us to recognize
how this personal loss has a “generative connection to all else that follows,” and she reads the essay as modeling a new kind of elegiac mourning of loss that finds a new way to represent grief by means of its discursive process. Cameron flatly states that “‘Experience’ is an elegy, an essay whose primary task is its work of mourning” (25).

The new form of elegy she has in mind, however, depends on a Freudian model of mourning loss. Cameron makes a point of emphasizing that Emerson’s radical innovation here is to develop a healthy-minded process of mourning as an alternative to melancholy. The model of writing designed to facilitate this process of mourning is the elegy. Cameron argues that the elegiac in Emerson “has a logic of its own – not one of working through (not one of synthesis) and not one of explicit conflict” (17). She then distinguishes this open-ended concept of mourning from what has been thought of (since Freud) as the failure or refusal to mourn: “It may seem along the way as if I am describing, or as if Emerson is portraying, a condition of ‘melancholia.’ Instead, I argue, he is creating a powerful and systematic representation of grief” (17). And while she acknowledges that the “Freudian explanation might be inadequate” because “the work of mourning needs to be repeated” and it is a continual process without closure, Cameron states in unequivocal terms that her own “understanding of the process of mourning in the essay depends on a Freudian model.”

This experimental notion of the mourning process may seem like somewhat odd move in the context of recent criticism, since a melancholy refusal to mourn within the Freudian model (as we saw in Chapter One) has invited a range of critics to reconceive melancholy as the rejection of the closure and “synthesis” and the demand for conformity associated with the mourning process. Cameron characterizes this Emersonian process of mourning as open-ended, but she does so by redefining mourning as a repeatable and never-ending process – a mandate for healthy living. Elegiac writing, then, becomes a form of open-ended experimental writing. This is a natural way to characterize what Emerson so clearly envisions as an ideal of process writing; it also accounts for some of the discursive processes that structure “Experience,” including what appears to be the casual abandonment of topics (such as the fleeting mention of Waldo’s death). There are serious problems, though, if we want to treat Cameron’s notion of elegiac process as an alternative to epistemic values, unless we make the mourning process of changing and replacing objects to which we are libidinally attached itself a procedural value. There is
some basis for this reading in “Experience.” At one point, for example, Emerson urges us (in the name of “health”) to avoid melancholic dwelling upon objects. “Our love of the real draws us to permanence,” he writes, “but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects” (Essays 476). But Cameron’s experimental version of elegiac mourning as a repeatable and open-ended process is also quite close to Freud the scientist’s healthy-minded embrace of transience in favor of a proceduralism that is based on a reality principle – not a “love of the real,” but a commitment to what Weber characterized as an open-ended nihilistic process. As we saw in Chapter Three, epistemic values are entirely compatible with non-foundational procedures, such as the positivist’s progressive model of theoretical change as planned obsolescence.

Cameron writes that the “Freudian explanation might be inadequate” because “the work of mourning needs to be repeated.” This is crucial qualification. As we have already seen, this is exactly Freud’s defense of the open-ended procedure of science, not as a response to any specific loss but as what James would call a “total reaction upon the world” – to a disenchanted world, in which we have gain the idea of objective facts but lose the idea of nature as a source of value. The healthy-minded scientific world-view that Freud advertises is one that embraces transience as a mandate for adopting an open-ended procedure of inquiry that is premised on the planned obsolescence of all theories whose passing, like all things in the world, we are called upon to mourn in the interest of progress. When we make mourning a repeatable and therefore open-ended process (as Cameron wants to do), then we begin to collapse the formal distinction between mourning and melancholy and begin to see them as two possible responses to the disenchantment of modernity and to the fact of transience. Emerson’s “healthy” response to disenchantment, however, is quite different from Freud’s embrace of change in the name of the procedural values of positivist science – a social contract that Emerson would likely have considered another example of a “paltry empiricism.” The most serious problem with Cameron’s reading, then, is that her emphasis on the private project of elegiac mourning comes at the cost of obscuring the radical implications of Emerson’s much larger aim of replacing the value of both a knowable world as well as the pursuit of that knowledge in the form of a standardized procedure (the positivist’s standard of verifiability, for example). Cameron’s elegiac “logic” makes writing itself a generic procedural activity, a repeatable ritual with pre-established aims, rather than a space in which new values can be created through the
process of articulation. It is Nietzsche, in other words, who most clearly sees in “Experience” a powerful way of dealing with the cultural crisis of nihilism and the problem of value.

One other way to address Cameron’s concern about acknowledging the significance of the loss of Emerson’s son would be to read “Experience” in relation to a different model of experimental writing whose with historical ties – not as the genre of elegiac mourning, but to read the essay itself. Cameron’s basic challenge, one that she does not acknowledge, is to reconcile the open and discursive experimentality of the essay as a mode of writing with the closed ritual form of the elegy as genre. In the introduction, I looked briefly at the importance of Montaigne’s essays as a model, for both Emerson and Nietzsche, of self-articulation as a non-epistemic source of value. In “Experience” he declares that he will no longer read Montaigne for the matter of his writing but instead try to adopt his method. Elegiac writing may have a logic of its own, as Cameron asserts. But the early modern essay, conceived as a response to an earlier crisis of value, follows its own peculiar logic. There is a reason for Emerson’s adoption of Montaigne’s essay as his chosen mode of writing. We can also respond to Cameron’s claim that the loss of his son has a “generative relation” to everything else in Emerson’s essay by quoting Montaigne’s on the death of his close friend, Étienne de La Boétie, as an account of the genesis and motivation for his own project: “he alone possessed my true image, and he took it away with him. That is why I—myself—interpret myself, with such care.”

Cameron wants to reclaim “Experience” from philosophical readings and understand its radical implications within more of a literary context, and not necessarily in connection with the “writing methods of the twentieth century,” but as experimenting with a new form of literary elegy in the unlikely mode of the essay. Cavell answers in a very different way than Cameron does the question of what role art and literature are to play in this experimental endeavor. It is not the elegy but writing as exemplary overcoming – the “work” of mourning. Perhaps the most important articulation of what Cavell calls his “moral perfectionist” reading of Emerson may be found in Cavell’s essay, “Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche” which (as the title indicates) invokes a number of other philosophers in a reading of Emerson. Cavell understands the process of mourning in a quite different

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166 Emerson, of course, wrote a well-known essay on Montaigne’s skepticism as style (“Montaigne; or, the Skeptic”).
way than Cameron does, as the necessary “solvent” for making possible a way of life by abandonment – art thus becomes a therapeutic enactment of treating oneself as well as one’s worldly attachments as “caduceous.” There is an abandonment of acquired selfhood, and that requires the constant work of mourning old attachments and old identities so as to make possible new ones. The essay becomes the arena for staging the “melodrama” of writing oneself. Cavell’s account makes essay writing a form of “writing the self” – but a writing of the self that requires the melodrama of constant interpretation of the self performed. This also requires the imagining of an interlocutor (Cavell invokes Wittgenstein). The fundamental problem, of course, is that interpretation (the interpreted image of the self) comes to replace the activity of articulation. The essay becomes a means of self-knowledge, rather than a source of new values that overcome the desire for knowledge. Emerson writes that he is “very content with knowing, if only I could know” (491). The problem, for Emerson, is that knowing is an all-too-easy mode of satisfaction leading either to delusion or to nihilistic despair. For Cavell, the question of what the essay is “about” is less important than the question of how the text “works on” the reader and how it wants us to conceive of the process of writing as a working upon and working toward. Cavell has expressed doubts about other critics’ attempts to cast Emerson as a pragmatist or a proto-pragmatist. In his essay, “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?”, Cavell asks how pragmatist texts “work” on their readers, with the implication that pragmatist criticism (preoccupied as it has been with process metaphysics and the possibility of a radical empiricism) has failed to acknowledge as the central question the work that writing does.

While Cavell’s response to pragmatist critical orthodoxy is a much-needed critique, there are also serious problems with his moral perfectionist reading of Emerson. One problem is that Cavell’s appeal to Freudian self-interpretation runs directly counter to the surface metaphors, and the rejection of “deep meaning,” that we find throughout Emerson and Nietzsche. While Emerson does speak of the transformation of genius into practical power as “work,” he is also very explicit (as is Nietzsche) about avoiding the concern for interpreting deeper meaning, appearance and reality. An emphasis on “surface” (“We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them”) implies that there is no place for the melodrama of discovering hidden depths, whether we conceive this as self-discovery or self-creation (Cavell’s moral perfectionism thus demonstrates how antifoundational philosophy can still remain in thrall
to epistemic values). And so there is a real problem of making Nietzsche – and, I would argue, Emerson – compatible with Freud in the performative self-interpretive sense, as well as giving a role to the process of mourning in experimental writing.

Cavell also emphasizes the importance, in this project of performing the self, of “making oneself intelligible” to others in a social relation (hence, Cavell’s appeal to Wittgenstein) (Conditions 46). These are incompatible thinkers brought together, but Cavell at least recognizes some of the pressures and parameter that make this program of overcoming a challenge. Cavell’s appeal to Nietzsche and Wittgenstein (and Heidegger) also suggests that these are problems that Emerson did not fully recognize himself. The need to represent oneself to others in dialogue is not to be found in Emerson, who is quite explicit in his embrace of solipsism and our inability to know others and to relate ourselves to others (and that is one reason for highlighting the “relational” theme in “Experience”).

Cavell’s concept of “moral perfectionism,” which joins Nietzsche with Emerson and conceives of philosophy as a conduct of life, is based on what he calls (picking up a phrase from Emerson) the motive of “aversive thinking.” Cavell writes that “In moral perfectionism, as represented in Emerson and Nietzsche, we are invited to a position that is structurally one of martyrdom”¹⁶⁷ (56). Aversion and transgression, of course, can easily become programmatic ends in themselves, sustaining a perpetual self image of the heroic outsider to culture. Cameron, incidentally, echoes these melodramatic terms (perhaps echoing Cavell) the “constant martyrdom of the self.” But for Nietzsche, the challenge was doing this without assuming the cultural pose and attitude of the martyr with its counterfeit satisfactions (and what Nietzsche calls “counterfeit heroism”). The problem for Nietzsche becomes how to develop a transgressive performative aesthetic without this heroic imaging of the self as the martyr who courts suffering and engages in melodramatic struggle – hence, Ecce Homo is an experiment in what Henry Staten calls the “exploding hero.” In the next chapter, I want to look at the danger of taking aversion to conformity and mobility as values in themselves, as inadequate responses to the problem of creating new value. I will look more at this contradiction in the next section in my reading of what is perhaps the most self-conscious example of performative writing – Ecce Homo – that makes clear what is at stake in how we conceive of this experimental endeavor.

¹⁶⁷ This language, incidentally, echoes Cameron’s “continual martyrdom of the self.”
CODA: Emerson and the Work that Writing Does

In this chapter, I have tried to read “Experience” as a post-Romantic manifesto and show how it enacts and envisions a break from the epistemic values of Wordsworthian romanticism – how Emerson takes us (or at least attempts to take us) from epistemology to romance. The final question I want to address is how Emerson’s concept of melancholy and his radically reflexive practice of converting genius into practical power – the value-creating activity for which “the world exists” – might be translated into the practice of experimental writing. What function does writing have in effecting this conversion, and what kind of process is writing supposed to model? If we “live among surfaces” and the “art of life is to skate well on them,” then does Emerson ask us to abandon writing altogether and pursue romance as a way of living one’s life as art?

Emerson himself gives us something of a key to understanding the stylistic features of his abstract essayism:168 “Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness, -- these are the threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life” (490-91). “Reality,” for Emerson, is only one “thread” among others. Emerson is thus quite clear in making large claims, and this is a climactic summation in Experience. Hence, the aporhistic, discontinuous, paratactic style of Emerson’s writing: a succession of “surprising” sentences. There is also Emerson’s “freeze frame baroque,” as Sontag characterized Walter Benjamin’s sentences, Emerson’s lapidary and discontinuous style that makes stepwise progress but refuses to take flight or move toward climaxes. A number of passages in Emerson read like an array of “ejecta”; his sentences are themselves “caduceous” and fall away from him.

Consider the freeze-frame baroque structure of the language in the passage which I analyzed earlier:

168 Emerson gave his ten "Laws of Writing" to his young correspondent, George Woodbury, in 1860.

1) Write not at all unless you have something new.
2) Write it, and not before, behind, and about it.
3) Have nothing of the plan visible—nor firstly, secondly, or thirdly. Show the body, not the ligaments.
4) Do no violence to words. Use them etymologically.
5) Don’t quite satisfy the reader. A little guessing does him no harm, so I would assist him with no connections. If you can see how the harness fits, he can.
6) Start with no skeleton or plan. Knock away all scaffolding.
7) Speak in your own natural way.
8) Avoid adjectives. Let the noun do the work.
9) Out of your own self should come your theme.
10) Only read to start your own team.
Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man, whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. (473-74)

Here is a specimen of a style in which sentences do not entail one another in the conventional sense. One sentence does not “deliver us” to the next, in the sense of logically entailing it. The conventional transitions between them have been carefully severed, though there are links. (The verb “see” laces its way like a motif through the final sentences.) When we expect to find a transitional pronoun or phrase at the beginning of a sentence, we are often thrown off and disappointed in our demand for easy continuity: what “it” is that “depends on the mood of the man” refers not to any antecedent in the sentence we have just read, but has a proleptic function fully contained within the sentence we have not yet finished reading. On a first glance, all of these sentences read like a string of aphorisms; they proceed like a train of passing and discrete moods that “do not agree with one another.”

There are a few other more general features that we might note in Emerson’s essay writing as we encounter it in “Experience.” First, it is “must be abstract.” For the most part, Emerson’s imagery is not natural; the metaphoric dimension of his writing is at the extreme opposite of picturesque. Emerson is almost metaphysical in its conceits. There are steps, platforms, circles, spheres. The essay “Nature” is one of Emerson’s earliest works; but in no sense can we call the later Emerson of “Experience” a “nature poet.” Indeed, it is striking how little natural imagery – or any imagery at all – we are given in “Experience.” As John Updike observes, “the terrain to which [Emerson’s] auditors are released is dauntingly featureless.” Following this program, Emerson’s post-romantic essayism must therefore be abstract and reflexive (not picturesque), and this requires a Cartesian stripping away of images and involving a radically reflexive turn. Emerson rejects the “matter” of Montaigne and declares that he will

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169 It should be noted, as well, that the language of this particular passage owes something to the aphoristic cadences of the book of Ecclesiastes.
only follow his “method”: Emerson commences with an essentially Cartesian project, but rejects the epistemic cogito (one radically reflexive method) in favor of another reflexive method – Montaigne’s essayism as philosophical skepticism converted to a method and a style. Emerson’s writing is still Cartesian, though, in its abstractness – a quality that Emerson does not include in his list but exemplifies throughout his writing in “Experience.” The essay is abstract and difficult in the modern sense; it embodies the kind of “difficulty” that T.S. Eliot argues (in his essay on the Metaphysical poets) is necessary to comprehend the variety and complexity of the modern world.

Emerson’s “dissociative method,” Sharon Cameron writes, “reflects the self’s relation to its own divergent claims” (Impersonality 55). In Emerson’s essays, Cameron also notes, “contradictory propositions ... are the solvent that dissolves personality”170 (“Way of Life” 18). But contrary to what Cameron suggests, there is little in the way of sublime performative self contradiction. The “mid-world,” Emerson writes, “is best.” Emerson considers various options and shows their inadequacy; but the effect is not that of sublime contradiction. Emerson’s sense of structure, in fact, is uniformly quite undramatic and unemotional; his paragraphs do not build to climaxes in a hypotactic manner, and his paragraphs are not noticeably more “emotional” in contrast with his “unemotional” sentences (as Gertrude Stein claimed paragraphs were in relation to sentences). Instead, we find a good deal of juxtapositional structuring, stepwise movement, and qualification of earlier sentences separated by some distance from one another. His lines are aphoristic and quotable, even ruin-like, but they qualify each other in subtle and complex ways, connecting and interlocking with each other in a spatial more than a musical or cumulative sense. Even though the sentences are not cumulative in a conventionally musical sense, there is a logic to Emerson’s experimental essay writing. It is not elegiac in the formal sense. But it does pursue a kind of “fatalism” as method in its paradoxical manner of articulating possibility by way of ruling out options and laying down parameters. As an example of Emerson’s “negative dialectics,” consider the final passage in “Experience” that culminates in the famous final line on transforming genius into practical power, a line that lends itself (as so much in Emerson does) to aphoristic quotation but reads quite differently when qualified by context:

170 Cameron alludes to a very differently phrased line in Emerson’s “Intellect”: “Silence is a solvent that destroys personality, and gives us leave to be great and universal.”
I observe that in the history of mankind there is never a solitary example of success,—taking their own tests of success. I say this polemically, or in reply to the inquiry, Why not realize your world? But far be from me the despair which prejudices the law by a paltry empiricism;—since there never was a right endeavor but it succeeded. Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but, in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (491-2)

The sentence quoted at the head of this chapter now reads, in context, as the culminating move of a curious logic that moves by a stepwise acknowledgment of limits that establish parameters for a given project. This is not “romance” as a liberation from constraints, but what Emerson describes (in one of the only natural metaphors he employs in “Experience”) as a “holding fast to the rocks” of objective obstacles that make our responsive movements and maneuvers meaningful. Emerson’s polemical response to the question “Why not realize your world?” and to the notion that pragmatic success in these arbitrarily pursued projects is somehow a test of value, can also be read as a pre-emptive critique of later versions of pragmatism (including, perhaps, Rorty’s cheerful neo-pragmatism). This, Emerson seems to say, is what “romance” cannot be. As we will see in the next chapter, this experimental activity premised on fatalism, an amor fati as method, would become a model of experimental value creation for Emerson’s most important reader.
Chapter Five: Nietzsche’s Nostalgia for the Future and James’s Philosophy of “As If”

Neither in the theoretic nor in the practical sphere do we care for, or go for help to, those who have no head for risks, or sense for living on the perilous edge. Our religious life lies more, our practical life lies less, than it used to, on the perilous edge. But just as our courage is so often a reflex of another’s courage, so our faith is apt to be a faith in some one else’s faith. We draw new life from the heroic example. The prophet has drunk more deeply than anyone of the cup of bitterness, but his countenance is so unshaken and he speaks such mighty words of cheer that his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own.

William James, “The Will” (Principles of Psychology 26)

Nietzsche once called Schopenhauer his most important “philosophical educator.” But it was Emerson who was Nietzsche’s most important guide in showing him the way to transform and overcome philosophy itself while at the same time pointing Nietzsche away from Schopenhauer and toward a new concept of art.171 What Emerson made clear was the need for a new concept of art as having a function within the world, not as an anodyne or a consolation for the shortcomings of life. In Emerson’s impact on Nietzsche, we may locate the beginnings of what would become the avant-garde anti-art aesthetic. The problem with the existence Hamlet is that it can become an art object for our passive contemplation, a canonical work that people admire but which no longer shocks or moves with the exemplary force of its genius. Emerson writes of the “immobility and absence of elasticity which we find in the arts” (“Experience” 477). However vaguely, Emerson nevertheless charges creative writing with the task of remaking itself into some form of a via activa, rather than a via contemplativa. Emerson freed Nietzsche from Schopenhauer, but that leads to a new and newly demanding set of questions about just how to reconceive the function of art. We see in Emerson and Nietzsche a joint conceptual rebirth of philosophy and art, which, at times, sounds like an art-as-life aestheticism and a program for living one’s life as a

171 David Mikics argues that it was Emerson who helped Nietzsche “overcome” the early influence of Schopenhauer (15-16). If this is true, then Emerson complicates our understanding of Nietzsche’s aestheticism, or at least forces us to distinguish between Nietzsche’s early and late concepts of the aesthetic. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche reflects on his first published book, Beyond Good and Evil, where he elaborates an earlier Schopenhauer-inspired aestheticism. Nietzsche writes that the earlier book “smells offensively Hegelian and the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer sticks to a few formulas” (Basic Writings 726)
work of art. We can quote from Emerson a number of lines that sound like manifestos for an art-as-life aestheticism, and often (moreover) sound like an anticipation of the (late) Rimbaud who made the radical move of abandoning poetry altogether. “Life is a surface,” Emerson tells us, “and the trick is skating well”; “The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment”; and we are at one point advised to live our life “in the strong present tense.” There are many such aphorisms, and they often have a one-to-one correspondence with similar lines in Nietzsche (what Stanley Cavell called “transfigurings” of Emerson).

It has long been a commonplace to think of Nietzsche’s anti-philosophy as a rejection of the abstractions of philosophical idealism and a demand for a philosophy that will help us to live our life to the fullest, which is close in spirit to the more traditional concept of philosophy as the art of how to live one’s life (or, alternately, Montaigne’s learning how to die). But as we have seen, neither Nietzsche nor Emerson really gives us much in the way of practical advice for changing our lives. Nowhere does Emerson tell us we should live our life as if it were a work of art. Nietzsche and Emerson both spend more time in the peculiar effort of making it clear to us what this new concept of aesthetic value creation cannot be in practice. Their alternatives to conventional notions of art are not ways of living one’s life, but rather ways of creating and testing out new values by which to live one’s life. For Nietzsche, it is art that represents a space for realizing an alternative to the values of instrumental reason and the Will to Truth. Better than any other reader of Emerson, it is Nietzsche who helps us to clarify how aesthetic practice can realize “practical power” as a challenge to (and substitute for) a culturally dominant Will to Truth.

Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo, the text I will focus upon in this chapter, opens with the stated mission of “confront[ing] humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it” (Basic Writings 673). What is this “difficult demand” whose reality and urgency Nietzsche wants us to recognize? How does Nietzsche

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172 The key anti-art passage in “Experience” may be found on pages 476–477.
173 Another manifestation of what we might call an anti-art aesthetic is one that involves some brand of process philosophy, an art that models itself and understands its function by appeal to some metaphysics of Becoming. A central problem with this concept of art as modeling process, a problem I touched on in Chapter Two, is the question of how to reconcile the value-creating process of aesthetic articulation with a metaphysical notion of transitional process itself as having an intrinsic value as a model for artistic experiment. See Sharon Cameron’s “Emerson’s Impersonal” (page 6f) for a good summary of Emersonian notions of the function of writing as performing and realizing genius as “vehicular, transitive, mobile” (Richard Poirier’s characterization).
174 The syntax “made of it” echoes James’s “questions put to us.” (The original reads: mit der schwersten Forderung andie Menschheit herantreten muss.)
175 All references to Ecce Homo made hereafter will be to the text as it appears in The Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (Walter Kaufmann, translator).
recognize these demands, and why does he see writing as a problem, in ways that Emerson does not? Was Nietzsche simply manufacturing problems for himself, as Emerson (and perhaps Nietzsche himself) might have viewed his arduously elaborated philosophy of simply saying “yes” to life? One answer would be to say that Nietzsche was more radical than Emerson in taking nihilism to its consequences and understanding it in a cultural and historical sense. One could also point out that Emerson simply bypassed these problems that preoccupied Nietzsche, on account of his appeal to the concept of the Oversoul (a concept for which Nietzsche had no use at all). Or, we might suggest that Emerson most clearly points the way to Nietzsche “Experience” pursued the implications of nihilistic thinking as far as he ever would and that Nietzsche spent virtually his entire life exploring the implications of the radical nihilism considered in “Experience.”

My concern here is not whether Nietzsche misread Emerson, or who is the more radical thinker. I am primarily interested in how Nietzsche turned Emersonian thought into a particular concept of writing as a challenge to philosophical (epistemic) values, as a way of overcoming epistemology. The problems as Nietzsche conceived them are important here because they provide a direct link to modernist writing. In this chapter, then, I want to look at how Nietzsche develops Emerson’s thinking about melancholy, and the conversion of skepticism into a method, so that we can appreciate the role that Nietzsche plays as the missing link to the writing methods of experimental modernism. In order for us to go from Emerson to modernist experimental writing, we need to see writing itself as a problem the way Nietzsche did, and we need to recognize what is special about the concept of articulation itself as a mode of value creation. The demand we are made to confront in Nietzsche is not primarily the question of how to conduct one’s life through action or how to inspire others to take action in their lives; what Nietzsche shows us, as both a problem and a challenge, is the difficult task of establishing values through the reflexive processes of articulation. Nietzsche helps us to focus our attention not only on how the practice of philosophy gets replaced by aesthetic practices, but also on the question of how Emerson’s program for living (or what often sounds like such a program) becomes translated into questions about aesthetic practices. I want to read Ecce Homo as a culminating text in Nietzsche’s brief but intense career, as a breakthrough the moment when Nietzsche abandons the project of idealizing heroic types and models of living (Zarathustra) and writes with the purpose of demonstrating how the process articulation itself as a source
(an *alternative source*) of exemplary value.

Finally, I will turn my attention briefly to William James’s response to Nietzsche through Emerson. The irony in James’s *misreading* of Nietzsche is that both (as I hope is quite clear by now) owe a great deal of their thinking to the example and influence of Emerson. The importance of Emerson, in both cases, can hardly be overestimated, and his role has received something like the critical attention it deserves in recent decades. But the study of influence of Emerson must also be looked at carefully, because what is most interesting in James and Nietzsche is how they react differently to Emerson (and independently of one another). It is not just what Cavell called “transfigurations” of Emerson manifest themselves in the language Nietzsche employs in particular lines, but rather the more general concept of the role of writing. They are not disciples of Emerson, but develop his thought and take it in two different directions that tell us something about possible modernisms.

1. “These Bleak Rocks”: Emerson’s Objectivity

As I tried to show in Chapter Three, any effort to replace epistemic (representational) values with a fundamentally different source of value would require some new and radically *non*-epistemic concepts of “fact” and “object.” “Trust your own facts” Emerson advises us in “Experience” (490). The challenge, in other words, is how to retain a notion of the object or objective force or objective fact, but without making an ontological claim of any kind. The way they deal with this challenge accounts for a curious running theme and central feature of Nietzsche and Emerson – what we might call the paradox of an “experimental fatalism.”

As we also saw in Chapter Three, one problem with the “paltry” empiricist notion of objectivity is that it demands a “changing of objects” (as Emerson puts it) in accordance with an arbitrary verificationist (and research project) procedure that is designed to choose new objects for study based on those predefined interests. The problem, then, is how we can become responsive to the world (though not necessarily know the world) in a way that does not simply reflect our interests and mirror our intentions. And if we want to locate value in processes of articulation, then we can formulate the problem as the

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176 James’s pragmatist definition of truth (in the 1907 essay *Pragmatism*) as anything that “excites our interest” also raises the question of how we can be responsive to the “genius of reality” if that reality is always a function of our excited interests.
question: How do we have a concrete sense of obstacles to navigate, that are not “objects” in the sense of “goals,” that do not imply narratives of striving or struggle; and how do we have a notion of objective fact that is independent of subjective intention as well as epistemic concerns over accuracy and authenticity?

There were a number of ways to approach the problem. As heirs to Emerson, James and Nietzsche decided early on (independently of each other) that the crisis of a disenchanted epistemic culture demanded in response nothing less than a “new hierarchy of the passions” (as Woolf would put it). The dominant “intellectualism” of instrumental reason, encompassing both empiricism and rationalism, needed to be demoted and replaced by the reflexive value of experiencing oneself think and feeling oneself think. “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings,” Nietzsche claims in *The Gay Science*, because thoughts alone are “always darker, emptier, and simpler.” The “dilemma of determinism,” as James called it, was about accounts of human behavior that failed to acknowledge the full range of human motivations – hence, Nietzsche’s ambivalence toward Darwinian explanations of purposive behavior.178

177 This early passage comes from *Human, All Too Human* and appears as the “aphorism” Nietzsche titled “On the Chemistry of Concepts and Sensations”:

All we need, something which can be given us only now, with the various sciences at their present level of achievement, is a chemistry of moral, religious, aesthetic ideas and feelings, a chemistry of all those impulses that we ourselves experience in the great and small interactions of culture and society, indeed even in solitude. What if this chemistry might end with the conclusion that, even here, the most glorious colors are extracted from base, even despised substances? Are there many who will want to pursue such investigations? Mankind loves to put the questions of origin and beginnings out of mind: must one not be almost inhuman to feel in himself the opposite inclination?

This passage occurs following Nietzsche’s observation that “all problems of philosophy... pose the same question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate out of its opposite? [maybe quote some of his examples] So this is not about determining “origins” in the explanatory sense, but about becoming conscious of the *psychological* (and not dialectical) origins of our healthy reactions upon life in something more complicated than binary concepts like health versus illness. Nietzsche, of course, would continue to develop this health/illness dialectic in *Ecce Homo* with a rhetoric of inverting values, which (as we will see) is at odds with this notion of a “chemistry of all [these] impulses.”

178 On Nietzsche’s complex and ambivalent relation to Darwinian thought, see *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* by John Richardson. See also *Varieties of Religious Experience* Lecture 1 (Religion and Neurology) for James’s discussion of the confusion of causal explanation with what philosopher John MacDowell would later call the “the space of reasons.” The dilemma James writes of should therefore not be confused with the traditional philosophical problem of free will – as a young man, James had already, upon reading the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, resolved that his “first act of free will would be to believe in free will.”
As a first attempt at establishing a new hierarchy, or simply shaking up an old one, we thus see early attempts to blend or invert (or “problematize”) the somatic and the spiritual, efforts that (in spite of their inadequacy) nevertheless place James and Nietzsche squarely within the early modern humoral discourse on melancholy. This explains their flirtation with reductive materialism and biological determinism, all of which is best understood as a “strategic intervention” in a cultural crisis. Although it may sound odd coming from James and Nietzsche, these are attempts to reinstate some notion of an external object or fact to which we respond non-instrumentally, which can provoke a change in what James called a “a man’s whole scale of values and system of ideas.” In early James, there is an appeal to bodily states as primary cause/stimulus (the James-Lange hypothesis). Nietzsche’s flirtation with biological determinism persists in his more therapeutic appeal to “illness” as bodily instinct (the antidote to attitudes constructed around beliefs and self-interpretation). When Nietzsche refers to “illness,” even in his final work, it is often a cognate term for the body itself. “The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes to frightening lengths,” Nietzsche observes, “and often I have asked myself whether, taking a large view, philosophy has not been merely an interpretation of the body and a misunderstanding of the body.” 179 Like Woolf’s complaint that illness has never received proper treatment as a subject in literature, this is more of a provocation than a claim about historical neglect. In fact, Woolf might have quoted long passages from Nietzsche, who devotes a good deal of space to sometimes detailed discussions of physical illness and the body. 180 In Anatomy of Melancholy, Robert Burton wrote at length on the “rectification of the body,” and Nietzsche can sound very much like Burton when he obsesses over dietary habits, the proper cultivation of the body – intended not as self-help advice for the reader, but as a call to heed the limits of one’s body as a stimulus for creativity and reflective self-awareness (not to be confused with a subjective self-consciousness). The revival of the medieval “objective” humors that is in tension with the post-Ficino notion of melancholy as a subjective state that colors the world of the subject and implies a different notion of art as the expression of a subjective state.

179 Preface to The Gay Science.
180 See, for example, the extended passage on healthy dietary practices that appears in the section of Ecce Homo titled “Why I Am So Clever” (694-99).
They entertain non-intentional states and notions of physical cause (even biological determinism) as having an objective force that “startles us out of our propriety” as Emerson puts it, and challenges our habits of feeling and perceiving that always shape our experience of the world. But this is little more than a provocation, an inversion of the hierarchy. The basic problem with these early attempts is that James and Nietzsche are simply short-circuiting the epistemic space of reasons, inverting the body/mind dualism, by appealing to the “fact” of sensation or mood (for example). They are still working within a dualistic framework and have not fully escaped from it. In Principles of Psychology, for example, James still worked within what was an essentially a dualistic mind-body methodological framework. Nietzsche could simply appeal to Spinoza and his theory of affects; he was not particularly interested, it seems, in the latest scientific findings in neurology or regarding the physiological basis of pathological states.

Among affects, there were many possible alternatives for bypassing the space of reasons and replacing it with a stimulus-cause: sensations, passions, moods. Sensation, though, was already the province of Humean empiricism and implied a passive receptivity; and passions were already an essential component of Cartesian instrumental reason. That left moods. Like passions, moods are totalizing forces that subsume agency and make subjective intentions seem disconnected from more objective manifestations of intentionality.\(^{181}\) Moods are like passions in one other important respect: Neither gives a central place to attitudes and attitude-forming beliefs.\(^{182}\) “Our moods do not believe in one another,” as Emerson famously noted. Moods come over us, we are driven by passions.\(^{183}\) And so mood and temperament would have a special appeal for modernist thinkers who were seeking to models that would dissolve, or at least loosen the grip that instrumental reason had upon European culture.\(^{184}\)

But as Nietzsche recognized, our submission to these forces comes at a heavy price. We must sacrifice a sense of our agency: we are all receptivity\(^{185}\) when it comes to the blooming, buzzing world of sensations; we can become slaves to our passions and desires; and we are stationed as cloud gazers with respect to the mental weather of our ever shifting moods. These affective orientations can “dissolve

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\(^{181}\) See, for example, Ruth Leys’ critique of recent affect theory and its neglect of intentionality.

\(^{182}\) See Richard Wollheim pp. 76-77 for an account of emotion as inseparable from the process of forming attitudes.

\(^{183}\) See, for example, Philip Fisher’s impassioned defense of the passions in The Vehement Passions.

\(^{184}\) “Silence is a solvent that destroys personality, and gives us leave to be great and universal.” (Emerson, “Intellect”)

\(^{185}\) See passage in “Experience” where Emerson declares that “all I know is reception” (491).
personality” at the same time they render the subject passive. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche makes a point of
describing his philosophy as “Dionysian” and not “Heracleitian,” and the “decisive feature” of a Dionysian
philosophy, he tells us, is “the affirmation of passing away and destroying’ (729 [italics in original]). The
German word for subjective “mood” is Stimmung, which can also refer to external “atmosphere.”
Stimmung can also have the more active meaning of “attunement to.” The challenge is how to convert
the objectivity of ephemeral moods, which are subjective but occur to us, into some kind of power,
something other than passive submission or an affirmation of destruction that was something other
acquiescing to the process of self-erasure and the dissolution of personality.\footnote{186} The process of
attunement represented an alternative space for the exercise of agency. The primary question for
Nietzsche, however, is not what we became attuned to “in the world,” but rather how the reflexive process
of becoming attuned created a new sense of one’s power in the world. That is why Emerson’s self-
reflexive Cartesian method came to replace the interest in the reductive science of bodily causes (for
Nietzsche, much earlier than for James).

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Emerson’s concepts of mood and temperament are far from theoretical in spirit, nor are they
elaborated in anything like a theoretical context. They function as “nodes” within a program built around
the negotiation of constraints and parameters. Consider one of the most remarkable passages in
“Experience,” where the strenuous syntax of the language itself seems to navigate its way around the
parameters it lays down:

[We cannot say too little of our constitutional necessity of seeing things under private
aspects, or saturated with our humors.\footnote{187} And yet is the God the native of these bleak
rocks. That need makes in morals the capital virtue of self-trust. We must hold hard to

\footnote{\textsuperscript{186} Also note that James’s active total reaction \textit{upon} life (an ambiguous preposition, suggesting
“contemplation”) – not a passive reaction \textit{to} life or to one’s own shifting moods.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{187} The allusion to “humors” is one of numerous allusions in “Experience” to the historical discourse on
melancholy.}
this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly. The life of truth is cold and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions and perturbations. It does not attempt another's work, nor adopt another's facts. It is a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another's. (489-90)

Here, as elsewhere, Emerson gives us another of his emphatic and repeated reminders that we cannot know anything for certain, that there is no such thing as an unclouded and unmediated vision of the world as it "really is," that we can never penetrate into the heart of things. This is a constant refrain in "Experience," a radical skepticism to which he holds fast and to which he clings with an almost dogmatic fervor, the fact of the human condition of which we "cannot say too little." Why, then, is Emerson so insistent on taking note of the limitations of our possible knowledge, so relentless in drawing out the implications of a radical subjectivism and an almost dogmatic-sounding solipsism? The answer, I think, is to be found not in what Emerson affirms but in the method he elaborates. These regular affirmations of a skeptical lack of faith are spread out on the landscape, like trail markers or cairns; they establish "boundary conditions" for a fatalism as method which requires (among other things) that we "hold hard to [the] poverty" of the fact of our unknowing.

So much of the grammatical structure in this passage determines points of reference in relative terms -- "this poverty," "that need," "our axis," "your own facts from another's." There is also evidence of a carefully crafted syntactic ambiguity. "That need" -- the need that makes the value and virtue of "self-trust" -- refers to the necessity of seeing things according to our limited perspective, an antecedent which lies

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188 Here is James in Varieties: "It is notorious that facts are compatible with opposite emotional comments, since the same fact will inspire entirely different feelings in different persons, and at different times in the same person; and there is no rationally deducible connection between any outer fact and the sentiments it may happen to provoke." Without mentioning him by name, this is a concise account of Descartes's starting point.

189 Emerson gave a pithy (though somewhat cryptic definition of skepticism as "unbelief in cause and effect" (in his essay "Worship"). See, for example, Joseph Urban's recent work on Emerson and skepticism. Urban gives a good philosophical account that treats Emerson as a philosopher, and so he is guided by interests that are somewhat different from mine. What I want to look at here is how we get a notion of objectivity that serves as the parameters for a certain kind of experimental writing. See also the more contextual reading in Jessica Berry's "The Pyrohonian Revival in Montaigne and Nietzsche."

190 The image of these "bleak rocks" is so lacking in metaphorical context that we do not even know if we are navigating dire straits at sea or are meant to imagine them as rock formations on the surface of the land.
embedded within a sentence that is not the one that immediately precedes the demonstrative pronoun. Emerson’s writing typically forces us to read back recursively, retracing paths as if we were performing a heuristic Ariadne’s thread algorithm. Details of phrasing and word order also seem important here. We might take note of the decision to refer not to “truth,” but to the “life of truth” – the life lived in pursuit of truth. And it is not “so far cold and mournful”; it is so far mournful, but cold it is and cold it must be.

Cold and hard. Hardness, the hardness of Dürer’s stone, is one important physical quality in an otherwise abstract, even mathematical (and largely image-free) poetic language. “And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks”: The fatalism of acknowledged limitations is the necessary stimulus for “more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action,” which allows us to “possess our axis more firmly.” There is a obvious and pronounced sense of agency; this is clearly an active recovery of oneself, not a passive receptivity to a transformative event (a conversion experience). Curiously, there is nothing of substance, no core of a self, to “possess”: We possess our axis, taking command of a new positioning that gives us a sense of how we are oriented in relation to the world, which is not to be confused with the vantage point it offers for seeing the world. Emerson rigorously avoids the ocularcentrism of the scenic method; orientations trump perspectives and “counterfeit scene painting.” But while Emerson rejects Cartesian ocularcentrism, he retains Descartes’s self-reflexive and abstracting methods, but without epistemic foundational certainty or representational images – without visually “clear and distinct ideas” as our test of what to “trust.”

“Self trust” is not be confused with the earlier and better-known concept of “self-reliance.” And so we encounter an important-sounding new distinction in Emerson’s thought. We then read more on the importance of “knowing one’s own facts” from another’s. We learn that self-trust is not necessarily an aversion to societal conventions (the aversion to conformity that we readily associate with self-reliance). Continuing in a vein that clearly anticipates Nietzsche, Emerson presents his method as an alternative to, and at the same time expressing an aversion to, a particular culture of melancholy nihilism:

I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts; but I possess such a key to my own as persuades me, against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs. A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all
catch at him, and if he give so much as a leg or a finger they will drown him. They wish to
be saved from the mischiefs of their vices, but not from their vices. Charity would be
wasted on this poor waiting on the symptoms. A wise and hardy physician will say, *Come
out of that*, as the first condition of advice. (490)

This language of this passage is more immediately recognizable as Nietzschean in its concerns. The
imagery of swimmers drowning is uncannily prescient of Woolf's Mr. Ramsay – but of course, Emerson
probably had in mind the same eighteenth-century precedents that Mr. Ramsay was fond of quoting
(William Cowper’s “we perish, each alone”). If Arnold represents the “general drift of his time” (as he
describes himself at one point), then Emerson represents a vigorous counter-current. And an
extraordinarily prescient one, not only in his anticipation of this general tendency, but also in the specific
ways in which he cuts it off at the pass in his uncanny anticipation of Arnold’s “Sea of Faith” metaphor.
We can read this as the “wise and hardy physician’s” response to the self-absorbed melancholy of
Matthew Arnold and to Mr. Ramsay: “come out of that!” (or “come off it!” as we might put it today).

The intersubjective need for recognition is understood here as an *epistemic* problem. “Well, souls
never touch their objects,” Emerson observes in a somewhat ironic ("Yes, Virginia...") and conversational
tone. “An in navigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse
with.” It is a diagnoses of the situation that provides Matthew Arnold with the subject matter of his poems,
and at the same time it is a radically different response to it. In a later passage, Emerson writes that
“there will be the same gulf between every me and thee as between the original and the picture.”
Emerson understands the connection between the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of Arnold’s Sea
of Faith and the plea to “let us be true to one another,” the infinite (and imperial) demand for recognition
that never be fulfilled, just as he understands the problem of what Cavell calls the “imperative of
representing one’s self to others,” as merely the flip side of the fixation on accurate representations of the
(inner and outer) world. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche asks a rhetorical question, followed by an aphoristic
insight: “Is Hamlet *understood?* Not doubt, [but] *certainty* is what drives one insane” (*Basic Writings* 702
[italics in original]).
Arnold’s self-imposed solitude and self-ennobling resignation will not suffice. They are attitudes constructed in response to nihilism; what we need in response to nihilism is a rigorous method and a keen sense of what will not suffice. Our perception of the world is threatened, Emerson suggests, as well as our relations with other perceivers; no adequate “solution” exists to what philosophers refer to as the “problem of other minds.” And if we try to convey these facts to others, if we try to represent ourselves, then we run up against the problem of constructing imaginary images for the self. We produce images of the self-isolating and self-ennobling hero, and we generate a demand for recognition and sympathy which (as we have seen) can never be met. We sooner or later end up with the desperate pathos of “let us be true to one another” (and we become accessories to this theatrical self-ennobling strategy). The “life of truth” is a way of being true to ourselves, not the imaginary appeal to others which is always accompanied the possessive demand that they be true to us.

Emerson offers a lucid diagnosis a culture in need of new models. But he gives us more than that. “The way out of it” is to hold fast to the virtue of self-trust and pursue a rigorously self-reflexive fatalism, treating our limitations as primary, as a fate to embrace and as the “object” around which we can engage ourselves in relation to the world and perform our vigorous self recoveries. Emerson’s solution, as I suggested earlier, is in essential respects Cartesian. Emerson’s self-trust (which involves trusting “one’s own facts”) is something more than self-reliant individualism. It is closer to Descartes’s ideal of “self-responsibility.” So while Emerson declares that there must be a constant “change of objects” and we must let go of the demand for images and the demand for real contact, he urges us to “hold hard to this poverty” and to “these rocks” as a notion of objective constraint. The program is fundamentally abstract and reflexive; it has more to do with the subject taking his own perspective as objective constrain than it does with “object relations” in the ontological sense. What we want is not individual self-reliance in the face of nihilism, but reflexive self-trust as a full embrace of nihilism. Emersonian “facts” are redefined in self-reflexive terms: the value is in “our” facts over which we take ownership, in the way we possess our axis more firmly.” We see this theme of Cartesian self-responsibility theme taken up by Nietzsche, who asks us to try out new orientations and then “take command” (with that metaphor) and ownership of

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191 “The invalid’s demand for sympathy can never be met,” as Woolf writes in “On Being I’ll” (8-9).
192 Emerson is not the only philosopher to make a paradoxical appeal to the Cartesian ideal of selfResponsibility in an effort to overcome epistemology. See, for example, Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*. 
our “recovered” self after the fact. This axis is relative – not our coordinates relative to the objective world, but our “axis” that produces a world for us in what we would now call a phenomenological sense.

2. How Emerson Works Upon Nietzsche

Here is a typically rhapsodic passage in which Nietzsche idealizes a form of heroism by laying down parameters: 193

The soul that has the longest ladder and reaches down deepest – the most comprehensive soul, which can run and stray and roam farthest within itself; the most necessary soul that plunges joyously into chance; the soul that, having being, dives into becoming; the soul that has but wants to want and will; and the soul that flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circles... (Basic Writings 761)

We should first note the clear allusion to Emerson’s famous metaphor of the circles (in his essay of that title). This is Nietzsche in heroic idealizing mode, even though he idealizes heroic qualities (of an ideal “soul”) that are hard to attribute to any imaginable hero. What kind of ministerial purpose does this have? While rhapsodic in form, its aim seems to be to contemplate ideals that may not be realizable even in principle.

The above passage is a catalog of familiar Nietzschean themes, and it should be noted how Nietzsche (like James) develops what are recognizably Emersonian lines of thought. Note, for example, the theme of fatalism, of set parameters, of freedom and necessity: the circles bound us, but they are widening circles. We can also see a profoundly self-reflexive notion of power and heroism. It is the exemplary individual who can “run and stray and roam within itself.” [itals added] Finally, we might note the odd and metaphysically charged combination of depth and surface imagery – the widening circles and fleeing soul, the depths into which we plunge. There is an even more explicit fatalism than we see in Emerson. Nietzsche writes of “the most necessary soul,” the soul that relinquishes its will and exerts it at

193 quoted in Ecce Homo (Basic Writings 761); but originally appearing in the earlier Also Sprach Zarathustra.
the same time. In spite of his occasional predator versus prey rhetoric, Nietzsche’s heroism is Emersonian in its radical self-reflexivity. Nietzsche is interested in a attaining a reflexive sense of power, not a power over others.

There is also evidence here of yet another Emersonian inheritance, already familiar to us: the ideal of a telos without purpose (or a purposiveness without purpose or goal). It is important for both Emerson and Nietzsche to act without any goal in mind, to have purposive behavior without knowing the purpose – not self-annihilation and redemption, but a necessary self-forgetting. As Emerson wrote, “the one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle … The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment.” (“Circles”) We find out who we become after the fact. There are numerous quotable lines from Nietzsche in this spirit: “The end of a melody is not necessarily its goal,” for example. And this requirement applies also to redemptive conversion narratives, to programmatic notions of “moral perfectionism,” to what Nietzsche called, with derision, the optimistic meliorism of the “improvers of mankind.” This, of course, makes it all the more interesting that Nietzsche would choose Augustine’s confessions as a model, in a text that virtually invented the modern conversion narrative. A way of life by abandonment becomes important for Nietzsche because it allows the subject to establish values after the fact (that is to say, as a result of the powers manifest through articulation). The subject identifies himself as the executor of the order only after the order has been executed. There is also a curious reflexive ambiguity in Nietzsche’s German term for the goal of this performative behavior by which he defines the aesthetic: “Selbstgestaltung” – which translates to “self-fashioning” or a “giving form” to oneself and the responsive process of “self formation” or the self “taking form” or “self-formation” (with a distinct passive/active ambiguity).

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We see how Nietzsche effects a conversion of a philosophical paradox into an aesthetic challenge (and how he thus takes us beyond Emerson). The paradoxes at the heart of Nietzsche’s experimental writing are aesthetic, not metaphysical. His ultimate aim is to make aesthetic articulation replace the practice of philosophy itself. For Nietzsche, the challenge is not metaphysical but aesthetic –
which is why *Ecce Homo* passage alludes not to a definition of God but to a confessional mode of writing. When we convert an epistemic notion of “fact” into a non-epistemic concept, we also resolve (or, rather, *dissolve*) two well-known philosophical paradoxes associated with Nietzsche and Emerson, and we do so by converting them into aesthetic challenges: 1) the paradox of an experimental fatalism; and 2) the philosophical question of how a self that dissolves and abandons itself can exist to experience its own reconstitution as new. But as the passage above makes clear, the philosophical paradox of fatalism is thus resolved by converting it into an aesthetic challenge, treating the facts of one’s life, one’s perspective formed by one’s experience to date, as a limitation to transgress. In section 188 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explicitly conceives of this project by analogy with the artist’s working with materials:

> Every artist knows how far from the feeling of letting himself go his "most natural" condition is – the free ordering, setting, disposing, shaping in moments of "inspiration" – and how strictly and subtly he obeys thousand-fold laws precisely then, laws that precisely on account of their hardness and determination defy all formulation through concepts (even the firmest concept is, compared with them, not free of fluctuation, multiplicity, ambiguity.) *(Basic Writings 290-91)*

Aesthetic “facts” as constraints and stimuli are contrasted here with the softness (“infirmity”) of concepts.\(^\text{194}\) Nietzsche also contrasts artistic objectivity with the objectivity of science. In English, *Bestimmtheit* may also be rendered as “decisiveness” (*auf Grun ihrer Härte und Bestimmtheit spotten*). Note the qualitative contrast between *firmness* (*festeste*) and *hardness*, which may even be an intentional allusion to Emerson’s aim of “possess[ing] our axis more firmly.” This is not a manifesto for “art as life,” the free realization of (private) projects. Rather, there is an emphasis on the “ordering, setting, disposing, shaping” in moments of “inspiration” (sorted out within a typically Nietzschean proliferation of scare quotes). What becomes exemplary here is the concrete *workedness* that is evidence of the artist’s grappling with the material.

\(^\text{194}\) In his later summary of his own *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein calls logic “crystalline … the hardest thing there is” *(Philosophical Investigations 97)*.
With regard to fatalism, we might still ask how a transvaluation of values is possible at all if temperament is both primary and constitutes a fixed and limited perspective on the world. In other words, how do we get from critical accounts of temperaments as determining our relation to the world – perspectivism as solipsism, temperament as an iron wire and a kind of “fate” – to the experimental project of envisioning alternatives to those limited perspectives, to the project of re-envisioning the world at the same time as we remake ourselves? And how do we recognize the need for transcending given orientations, let alone assess their relative advantages, in the absence of a privileged perspective? This is what critics have long recognized in Nietzsche’s philosophy as the paradox of fatalism and perfectionist self-creation. Ecce Homo has the curiously worded subtitle: “How One Becomes What One Is” (Wie man wird, was man ist). [italics added in English translation] But if we regard this paradox from a non-philosophical point of view, then it becomes apparent that Nietzsche wants to treat the stable sense of self as a limitation and as a challenge to overcome, on a par with the materials that the artist works with and which provide the necessary stimulus for the creative act. Nietzsche’s fatalistic language is not the philosophical discourse involved with questions of determinism and free will, but proceeds rather by way of analogy with the creative artist who treats obstacles and material constraints as a stimulus for creation. Nietzsche wants to treat temperament (and illness) as a given but also as a stimulus for the work of Selbgestaltung, the continual process of giving form to oneself and to creating the values that compose a world for us. Ecce Homo is a bold experiment in replacing philosophical concerns (and the Will to Truth) with self-articulation as a radically new source of value. The artist’s freedom is in many respects the antithesis of an art-as-life aestheticism and the “romance” of pursuing private projects.

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We are well on our way to Ecce Homo, which is in many respects the culmination of Emerson’s most radical ideas, the work in which Nietzsche demonstrates how to embrace fatalism as part of a model of experimental writing (the “facts” of one’s life). Ecce Homo as an experiment in heroic articulation of the self as the articulation of new values (incommensurate with epistemic values): The passage quoted above appears again in Ecce Homo, which has a very different ministerial purpose than Emerson’s writing. He literally treats himself as a text, his work to date as the “facts” that define who he is. He is
performing the process of \textit{Selbstgestaltung}. It is literally an experiment in writing the self and treating the self as a text – treating the facts of one’s life as a limitation and a stimulus for further self-articulation (so the values that come from articulation actually trump the value of any program for living that is articulated and any specific ideals envisioned – an extraordinarily difficult demand that Nietzsche places on himself, from a writer who wants his writing to have an effect on people and to possess world-historical import. Do not follow the example of my life, he seems to say, but pay attention to the process of articulation itself -- become self-reflexively aware, just as Nietzsche models for us an attention to what might otherwise sound like a neurotic obsession with the state of his own body and with highly idiosyncratic habits associated with his personal health. “I am one thing, my writing is another.” But even that caveat demands an even finer distinction that he wants us to observe in the writing: 

\textit{In my writing, do not pay attention to what I say but rather to the manner in which and the process by which the utterance takes shape.} \(\text{--- Nietzsche}\)

Nietzsche takes on the two literary genres most historically connected with representational epistemic values: 1) Augustine’s “recovery from illness” narrative of the confession; and 2) Socrates’ (or, rather, Plato’s) \textit{apologia} with its rhetorical appeal for recognition that that aims to explain one’s actions (and the motives for one’s actions) to others and always runs the risk of slipping into self-rationalizing mode. By taking on the \textit{apologia}, Nietzsche enters directly into the “space of reasons” – enemy territory, so to speak, for representational and self-narrative values. As established genres of writing, the confession and the \textit{apologia} manifest the imaginary dimension of epistemic values in the sense that they are both defined by the task of creating narratives for an idealized self. The running joke, of course, is that Nietzsche quite consciously inverts and subverts these conventions. Answering the question of “How One Becomes What One Is” is a way of making \textit{amor fati} a means of imagining the self without self images and performing Emerson’s “vigorous self-recoveries” without situation oneself and imagining one’s actions within the broader context of a heroic recovery narrative.

If Emerson’s “circles” alludes to Augustine’s metaphysical definition of God, then Nietzsche has a practical interest in Augustine’s confessional mode of representing oneself and the conversion narrative (which are \textit{literary} challenges, not metaphysical paradoxes). “Facts” become material constraints, and the task of representing oneself, or anything else, becomes the task of making one’s articulation
representative – or what Wittgenstein (in a very different context) would later call a "perspicuous representation" rather than a faithful or accurate one. In Ecce Homo, we should also take note of an important shift from idealizing heroic figures (such as Zarathustra) to a focus on aesthetic articulation as a source of value. There is some irony here: Ecce Homo quotes at length from Thus Spake Zarathustra, in part because the book had not been widely circulated at the time Nietzsche was writing. Over the next two decades, it was actually Ecce Homo (published only in 1910, two decades after it was written) that would be overshadowed by the far more popular Thus Spake Zarathustra.

I read Ecce Homo as the ultimate Emersonian text, even though there is nothing in it that sounds quite like Emerson’s voice. At the same time, however, what is perhaps the central paradox of Ecce Homo also marks a point of divergence between Nietzsche and Emerson. A central challenge for Nietzsche is the problem of making one’s act of self-representation a representative act of value creation for others. When Nietzsche declares that “I am dynamite,” he means the example of his writing itself should have that impact. There are early signs of this paradox of making one’s activity representative in Nietzsche when he is in idealizing mode: Zarathustra, the exemplary hero, must go up to the mountains and come down again and he must be misunderstood by his contemporaries. The question is: Does Ecce Homo overcome this paradox or successfully do something with it?

For Emerson, personality is an impediment to our contact with the energy and process that links us with others. Once we dissolve personality, we are “given leave to be great and universal”: “Mood is the solvent which dissolves personality and gives us leave to be great and universal.” Here is a key passage on solipsism, which culminates in a Donne-like metaphysical conceit (another pre-emptive response to Arnold’s sea of faith).

The great and crescive self, rooted in absolute nature, supplants all relative existence and ruins the kingdom of mortal friendship and love. Marriage (in what is called the spiritual world) is impossible, because of the inequality between every subject and every object. The subject is the receiver of Godhead, and at every comparison must feel his being enhanced by that cryptic might. Though not in energy, yet by presence, this magazine of substance cannot be otherwise than felt; nor can any force of intellect
attribute to the object the proper deity which sleeps or wakes forever in every subject. Never can love make consciousness and ascription equal in force. There will be the same gulf between every me and thee as between the original and the picture. The universe is the bride of the soul. All private sympathy is partial. Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and whilst they remain in contact, all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire. (487)

There is no need for us to represent ourselves to others if we believe that we are all points of light and assume that being a receiver of Godhead authenticates our project. This indicates a crucial difference between Emerson and Nietzsche (not to mention James, who also had reservations about the Oversoul). It is also a problematic premise of Emerson’s thinking; it is what Sharon Cameron has characterized as a version of “liberal universalism” (Impersonality 86). Emerson could write, with full confidence, that “no enterprise was ever a good one than it succeeded.”

The concept of the Oversoul demonstrates why aversion to conformity and transgression are not important for Emerson the way it is for Nietzsche: Emerson essentially glosses over this problem of transgressive identity with his concept of the Oversoul. If we have the concept of the Oversoul, then we simply have no need for a transgressive logic. That is why Cavell needs to invoke Nietzsche along with Wittgenstein in making his version of Emersonian perfectionism a viable alternative: We have the need to transgress specific cultural values and the need to relate ourselves to others. In one way, Emerson’s blithe indifference to established culture (rather than aversion to it) is a strength, because the self does not oppose society so much as replace it – in Quentin Anderson’s phrase, Emerson presents himself as the “divine child who eats up the world” (19).

Here we arrive at what I would argue is a fundamentally important difference between Nietzsche and Emerson. It is important, in part, because it touches on the practical problem (for writing) of how to make one’s value-creating articulation exemplary and representative. Being representative is not that easy for Nietzsche, who (to a greater extent than Emerson) wants to make the manner of one’s articulation a source of value. Emerson’s rejection of “counterfeit scene painting” (in “Experience”)
becomes, in Nietzsche the problem of appealing to established models of heroism, Emerson’s “Representative Men,” what Nietzsche calls “counterfeit great men.” I will return to this problem later in the chapter, because Nietzsche’s own aversion to conformity leads to what I believe is one of the more serious failings of *Ecce Homo* as an experiment in modeling an “authentic” form of heroic value-creating activity.

The time for a close reading of *Ecce Homo* is long overdue. However, I do want to approach it with a sense of the enormous pressures on the writing to carry out the task of value-creation that Nietzsche wants the text to perform. *Ecce Homo* is an experiment in making articulation itself the source of value and the means of being representative in the world-historical sense; but as we will see, this intense critical self-awareness of the defining parameters of the task at hand leads to the creation of an “exploding hero” suspended a paradoxical state of paralysis.

3. A Close Reading of Two Passages in *Ecce Homo*

The first thing that strikes the reader of *Ecce Homo* is probably its lack of decorum, as boastful section headings (“Why I Am So Clever,” “Why I am a Destiny,” etc.). Nietzsche describes himself as “dynamite.” What I want to draw attention to, however, are those important passages in *Ecce Homo* where Nietzsche comes close to realizing his goal of not simply inverting values and the relation between means and ends, but instead attempts to blend them through the process of articulation, producing what we might call a miraculously unpremeditated (or at least unanticipated) “incarnation” of new value. I also want to show how this results in a special mode of writing and a different kind texture than the “explosive” and provocative aphorisms that we associate with Nietzsche (and which aim “to startle us out of our propriety,” as Emerson put it).

Nietzsche opens Section One by declaring (in a modest tone) that he is “experienced” when it comes to the question of decadence and has a well-developed sense for discriminating between what is healthy and what is decadent. “A long, all too long, series of years signifies recovery for me,” he writes. “Unfortunately, it also signifies relapse, decay, the periodicity of a kind of decadence” (679). This “periodicity” is what he calls the *nervous circulaire* of the mystic. “Looking again from the fullness and self
assurance of a rich life down into the secret work of the instinct of decadence – in this I have had the longest training, my truest experience.” [italics added] So the “truest experience,” in his judgment, is his realization that illness itself – the instinct of decadence – has created “the true present of those days in which everything in me became subtler – observation itself as well as all organs of observation.” If the organs of observation change along with the power of observation itself, then temperament cannot be fate in the sense of a limit that one cannot transform. Nietzsche replaces “experience” with a more subtle reflective sense of one’s power in relation to the world (orientation as a source of power). Our sense of meaning and value, then, changes with the way we frame our experience (the “organs of observation”). As this passage makes clear, Nietzsche is describing a “self-recovery” that is the opposite of a sublime conversion experience, and also not to be confused with a “dark night of soul” dialectic of sickness/health; we are talking about the self-reflexive “subtlety” of one’s observations, and self-observations, as a replacement for the facts of one’s limited experience.

Here we see a demonstration of “Stimmung” as attunement. The self-conscious intellect is no longer opposed to the realm of the affective and the subjective; the process of thinking is converted into an aesthetic experience, a complex process in which second-order reflection is woven – observation, along with the “organs of observation.” Nietzsche continues: “Even that filigree art of grasping and comprehending in general, those fingers for nuances, that psychology of ‘looking around the corner,’ and whatever else is characteristic of me, was learned only then...”. The art of grasping and comprehending, the fine filigree work of making distinctions and clarifying, etc., gets transvalued here into a reflective power of feeling oneself thinking. Even the will to truth, the activity and process of “grasping and comprehending,” suffers a sea change into something rich and strange. (And we should note the ambiguity of “comprehend,” which suggests not only “to understand” but “to take in”).

Now for a close reading of the even more remarkable extended passage in Section Two. “Apart from the fact that I am decadent,” Nietzsche confesses at the beginning of Section Two, “I am also the opposite” (680). In its intricately woven texture, and in its quiet and patient manner that is the opposite of “explosive,” the passage that follows is not entirely representative of the language of Ecce Homo; there is nothing aphoristic or provocative or outlandish, no trace of a sublime embrace of contradiction. The
“proof” of his assertion comes, rather, through slow stages, through the “fine filigree work” of its own gradually unfolding process of logical demonstration (which pursues a logic of its own). This is language that follows close to the surface; it is active and alert, and makes distinctions and clarifies by making clear in the process of clarification:

My proof for this is, among other things, that I have always instinctively chosen the right means against wretched states; while the decadent typically chooses means that are disadvantageous for him. As summa summarium, I was healthy; as an angle, as a specialty, I was a decadent. The energy to choose absolute solitude and leave the life to which I had become accustomed; the insistence on not allowing myself any longer to be cared for, waited on, and doctored – that betrayed an absolute instinctive certainty about what was needed above all at that time. I took myself in hand, I made myself healthy again: the condition for this – every physiologist would admit that – is that one be healthy at bottom. A typically morbid being cannot become healthy, much less make itself healthy. For a typically healthy person, conversely, being sick can even become an energetic stimulus for life, for living more. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me now: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them – I turned my will to health, to life, into a philosophy.

[...]

Well, then, I am the opposite of a decadent, for I have just described myself. (680-81)

Nietzsche is working his way through something here, and it has the vague sound of practical advice and “life wisdom” – but without really offering anything of that sort (the test of that would be to attempt a paraphrase of the passage in the form of practical advice). The entire passage culminates in a sentence that has the curious sound of both a quiet revelation as well as a quod erat demonstrandum affirming, almost mechanically, what is in any case (and in retrospect) logically necessary. At the end, he has not “described” himself; he has articulated the self he has been describing.
This is how Nietzsche foregrounds the value of articulation as a mode of non-representational description. What is important here is his effort to articulate himself, not the accuracy or authenticity of the self-description. The “truth” of what he has to say, on the level of assertion, is never anything more than a function of his perspective which is, in turn, a function of the health of his organs of observation” – the way things appeared to him then, versus the way things appear to him now. He has described himself into being. The passage is one of the most striking demonstrations in Nietzsche of how one becomes “what one is” by identifying with and taking ownership of one’s own acts (and “facts”) of articulation.

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We are now in a position to revisit the passage we quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two and read it, in light of the preceding, as a succinct summing-up of Nietzsche’s vision of the kind of experimental writing he wants to attempt:

The entire surface of consciousness – consciousness is a surface – has to be kept clear of any of the great imperatives … In the meantime the organizing idea destined to rule grows and grows in the depths … Regarded from this side my life is simply wonderful… Order of rank among capacities; distance; the art of dividing without making inimical; mixing up nothing, “reconciling” nothing; a tremendous multiplicity which is nonetheless the opposite of chaos – this has been the precondition, the protracted secret labor and artistic working of my instinct. The magnitude of its higher protection was shown in the fact that I have at no time had the remotest idea what was growing within me – that all my abilities one day leapt forth suddenly ripe, in their final perfection … No trace of struggle can be discovered in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. To want something, to "strive" after something, to have a "goal," a "wish" in view – I know none of this from experience. (65)
This passages encompasses a range of themes and concerns I have noted in the course of this chapter and in earlier chapters: the distinction between wish versus will, contemplating the limits of experience as a form of *amor fati*, the ideal of a *telos* without purpose, the idealizing of surface over depth. The passage can read like a program for a way of life by abandonment, but it is also articulating in the most precise and vigorous way what these efforts must “be kept clear of.” Nietzsche is exerting his will by qualifying and making it clear what he is *not* doing. Much like the syntax of Emerson’s “bleak rocks” passage we looked at earlier, this is the voice of someone who is taking control over his life by imagining distinctions and laying down parameters for himself. The tone of this voice, moreover, is calm; there is no obvious trace of struggle, but the movement of the language certainly traces the “filigree work” of a consciousness articulating its own sense of limitations. Consciousness (not “life”) being a surface does not imply that there are “depths” to discover, only powers to realize in the world. We have already looked in previous chapters, at how Nietzsche’s parameters pose a challenge to recent interpretations – Stanley Cavell’s appeal to Freudian psychoanalysis, for example.

The placid and confident tone of this passage, what we might describe as the voice of a newly recovered convalescent, belies the pathos and drama of *Ecce Homo* as it actually carries out this program. Having no trace of struggle in one’s life (and fixing on that as an ideal) is not the same as avoiding all traces of struggle in his *writing*. On the whole, *Ecce Homo* is anything but a “calm” piece of reflective writing. Critic and translator Walter Kaufmann once compared *Ecce Homo* with the agitated and anguished brilliance of the late paintings of Van Gogh. And while Nietzsche’s writing in *Ecce Homo* is certainly experimental, and it is without question one of the great works of world literature, it is not at all clear whether the writing meets all (or even most) of the demands that it sets out for itself. Let’s look more closely at the real contradictions that account for its exemplary failure.

4. *Ecce Homo* and the Paralysis of Nietzsche’s “Exploding Hero”

In a now classic analysis, Derrida ponders a stray fragment found among Nietzsche’s writings that reads simply: “I have forgotten my umbrella.” Derrida’s idiosyncratic reading, which attempts to

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195 Recall that writing from the perspective of a newly recovered convalescent was Benjamin’s description of Walser’s writing.
extrapolate significance from this linguistic “trace,” makes Nietzsche’s language bear some of the marks of Outsider Art. “We will never know for sure what Nietzsche wanted to say or do when he noted these words,” Derrida concludes, “nor even that he actually wanted anything.” Derrida suggests that the indeterminacy of this fragment is emblematic of Nietzsche’s entire body of work, which more or less dooms any effort to interpret what he writes or to derive from it any program for action.\(^\text{196}\) One does not have to accept Derrida’s broad claim in order to share these doubts as every reader of Nietzsche does at some point. It is a sobering consideration for a philosopher whose destabilizing and self-undermining experiments nevertheless seem to be in the service of a transvaluation of values with explicit world-historical implications (though one can always have doubts about this aim as well). I want to take seriously this aim, without being able to “prove” it, because it is also the explicit aim of so many modernist artists of the following generation. And because Ecce Homo is arguably Nietzsche’s most radically experimental work, and thus a model of how that project might be carried out through writing, I want to identify some of its failures and genuinely problematic contradictions, as measured against his stated goals (which is how I read the “no trace of struggle” passage quoted above).

While Nietzsche celebrates appearances over deep reality, as in the passage above, he seems to exchange this distinction for a new set of binaries: the notion of authentic versus counterfeit, the pose versus the instinct. Emerson’s appeal to “counterfeit scenery” becomes, in Nietzsche, the problem of appealing to what he calls “counterfeit great men.” Nietzsche singles out Richard Wagner (not surprisingly) as well as the early nineteenth-century iconic figure of Thomas Carlyle, the “counterfeiter” whose “hero worship” he has repudiated so maliciously. “All the problems of politics, of social organization,” Nietzsche declares, “have been falsified through and through because one mistook the most harmful men for great men.” (712). He once again attacks the “pathos of poses,” with more than a hint of a theological Bilderverbot\(^\text{197}\) that rejects the exemplary images of greatness that find currency within a culture and (and, according to Nietzsche, do harm).\(^\text{198}\) He states that he wants to be the “opposite of them” – and that presumably means that Nietzsche aspires to be read differently, to be

\(^\text{196}\) In Derrida’s Spurs: Nietzsche’s Style (123f).
\(^\text{197}\) The German word for a “prohibition on graven images,” or visual representations more generally, that one of course finds in various forms in Judaism, Islam, and (Protestant) Christianity.
\(^\text{198}\) Nietzsche repeatedly employs the adjective pathetisch, which in German means histrionic, bombastic, in the theatrical sense (not in the narrow English sense of “pitiful”).
representative in a different way and *not* be “mistaken” for someone he is not. Given his provocative lack of decorum, it might come as a surprise to readers when Nietzsche maintains that “there is not a moment in my life to which one could point to convict me of a presumptuous and pathetic posture. The pathos of poses does *not* belong to greatness; whoever needs poses at all is false.”

Nietzsche generally embraces antagonism as healthy; but the value of antagonism is often replaced in *Ecce Homo* by an aversion to conformity, a self-imposed mandate which constitutes a different ideal. Nietzsche, the philosopher of *resentment*, contrasts himself with those “first men” in the following way: “I do not even count them among men in general: for me they are the refuse of humanity, monsters of sickness and vengeful instincts; they are inhuman, disastrous, at bottom incurable, and revenge themselves on life.” Such antagonism laced with contempt is not necessarily a serious contradiction of Nietzsche’s stated ideals. But it might lead readers, adopting the spirit of Nietzsche’s discriminating mode, to make another distinction that Nietzsche seems to elide: the difference between a transvaluation of values and a simple inversion of values. He writes of “Zarathustra, the first psychologist of the good, is – consequently – a friend of evil” (786). His insight into the good, he writes, made him shudder, and it was “from this aversion that he grew wings ‘to soar off into distant futures.’” This poetic figure, we might also note, is a direct allusion to Dürer’s winged angel. This occasional tendency to *invert* values places Nietzsche in the company of Lautréamont and those who idealize evil simply because it is the opposite of the good. We might read such passages the same way we respond to the over-the-top boastfulness of the section titles; but it is hardly an illustration of fatalism as distinct from attitudes, and as an attitude this flirtation with a sensational “cult of evil” is anything but a *post-romantic*.

There are contradictions of a more serious kind in *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche wants to create an open “template” for values as yet unrealized, but that also requires the positing of an ideal future audience who will understand the true meaning of the example he is trying to set. The artist creates the values by which he will be judged, which in turn requires a self-imposed solitude in an effort to resist the (internalized) demand for current recognition and validation. “I am solitude become man,” Nietzsche declares in the mock-prophetic tone of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (*Basic Writings 799* [from a rejected draft of *Ecce Homo*]). Nietzsche elsewhere writes that “*Suffering* from solitude is also an objection – I have suffered only from ‘multitudes’” (714). This, of course, invites a comparison with Whitman and his mode
(a tactic most explicitly stated in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”) of addressing imagined crowds of people, present and future, in response to his despair over the distance between them: "Closer yet I approach you." Whitman writes with confidence; Nietzsche’s audience, by contrast, must remain at a distance (the idealized future of Emerson’s “new, yet unapproachable America” (“Experience” 485 [italics added]).

Imagining a future audience, however, simply takes the problem of Lacan’s imaginary mirror stage – “to be is to imagine how oneself is perceived by a third party” – and transposes it to the form: “to be is to imagine oneself in relation to a future audience.” Nietzsche, like Whitman, imagines an ideal audience in the future, but one that will follow his example precisely by not being a slavish follower (someone, in other words, who will resist the seductive pull of a charismatic voice describing itself as “a destiny”). Ecce Homo ends with an extremely complex ironic gesture: “Have I been understood?” Nietzsche’s hero is a melancholy outsider who represents fate – a delayed awakening, for a select few, that is always in the future. He is lonely, but that loneliness remains (as it was for Zarathustra) a kind of validation of his genuine outsider status as well as his having seen farther than others. The fixation on the past gets converted into an idealism of future possibility: “My time will come ... will you be among the select few who recognize this?” Nobody understands him now. But history will vindicate him. There is not necessarily anything wrong with this strategy, but we might at least take note of how far we have moved away from Emerson’s ideal of living in the “strong present tense.”

The “pathos of poses” thus comes back with a vengeance. In addition to the pathos of delayed future understanding (the sentiment that “my time will come”), Nietzsche’s tactic of projecting a future audience generates what we might call the pathos of failed communication (based on the distance between what I mean versus how I am understood). Ecce Homo is an exercise in avoiding the pathos and sentimentality of transgressive heroism or the rejection of the world in the name of idealism. What Nietzsche does, in effect, is simply transfer a contemptus mundi to an idealistic contempt for present humanity in the interests of addressing oneself to a more receptive ideal future audience. We are made to feel “eager for better things,” in the words of Marsilio Ficino, whose Neoplatonic concept of heroic melancholy represents the kind of otherworldly idealism that Nietzsche so clearly wants to overcome.199

199 See Ecce Homo page 786.
Nietzsche seems to appreciate the trap, but that does little more than intensify the pathos. The conflict becomes internalized.200 “Under these circumstances,” he confesses, “I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom — namely, to say: *Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!*” He makes a candid and rather startling appeal to “duty” here, an appeal to be recognized for what he really represents and who he really is. The problem that Nietzsche seems to catch hold of here is the question of how can he (we) can avoid the pathos of unrealized potential as simply another version of the “buried self” Nietzsche is grappling with this challenge as it confronts *him*, and although Nietzsche is not altogether successfully, *Ecce Homo* dramatizes that struggle in a concrete and situational way. The absence of a grand narrative of overcoming adversity does not mean there is no struggle and no adversity to overcome.

Inevitably, reader-response paradoxes emerge. The section “Why I Write Such Good Books” opens with a direct and unequivocal statement: “I am one thing, my writings are another.” Nietzsche’s anti-art stance seems to take the peculiar form. It not only offends and meets with the incomprehension, it also at times embraces the fact of not being read at all. At the beginning of the section on why he writes such good books, he declares “My triumph is precisely the opposite of Schopenhauer’s: I say, ‘*non legor, non legar*’. [I am not read, I will not be read] (715). So what does this mean in a book that so explicitly aims to effect world-historical change? Is he offering his life, rather than his writings as exemplary? Or are we supposed to be paying attention to something else other than reading for meaning? “I am not read,” however, suggests outsider status, not misinterpretation.

Unlike the cryptic and perhaps uninterpretable jotted-down comment on forgetting an umbrella, *Ecce Homo* reflects almost obsessively on the question of its own exemplarity as a text. Nietzsche does not want his readers to identify with him: “Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.” This becomes a serious contradiction and a source of pathos and idealism — the kind that he wants to avoid. And he ends with the question he interjects repeatedly in the closing pages of *Ecce Homo*: “Have I been understood?” This is an intensely complicated performative gesture, its complex irony testing the expressive limits of ironic discourse. And it brings to a close one of the most remarkable experimental texts of early modernism.

200 We see particularly vivid evidence here supporting Freud’s famous claim that “Nietzsche developed a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived.”
This returns us to the central question of what experimental writing of this distinctly therapeutic kind is supposed to do, how it supposed to work upon the reader. Nietzsche wrote that “The effect of works of art is to excite the state that creates art” (qtd. in Bull 31). Once again, the problem with Hamlet is that it exists. If the idea is to realize one’s own powers as an artist, and if not everyone can become an artist, as Nietzsche believes, then what? Can that state be excited in everyone? How is aesthetic articulation, and writing in particular, supposed to be exemplary? Nietzsche writes in Beyond Good and Evil, sec. 260, that “[t]he noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges … it is value-creating.” This is not the legislative and judicial relationship of a bird of prey determining and judging what would make a good lunch. It is an expression of what Emerson called self trust, rather the aloof and detached self-reliance of the aristocratic type (even though it often takes these forms metaphorically in Nietzsche and Emerson) We get also the problem that Nietzsche confronts much more directly, of how writing (specific acts of articulation, not just the generic practice of articulating oneself) becomes exemplary. Or, in the self-writing of Ecce Homo, how one’s attempt to represent oneself become representativ. How is this noble type of man supposed to change the rest of the world – function as a “destiny” and as “dynamite”? Are we all meant to aspire to the conditional of autonomous, value-determining nobility, a “noble type of man” that means a permanently exclusive class (visionaries like Ayn Rand’s highly influential Zarathustra-figure, John Galt, who demand to be misunderstood by the masses)? (Nietzsche does not seem to think so: he often writes that the artists will always, as a structural necessity, be a select and elite class, set apart from the philistine herd, that one cannot have value creators who are not members of the elite “creative class.”

Nietzsche addresses an ideal audience who will understand him the way others do not. As readers reading in the present, what kind of audience are we supposed to identify ourselves with? All of this raises questions about how this writing is supposed to “work upon” the reader. Again, the question of how we are supposed to read this as practical advice. Are we all supposed to become artists or at least imagine ourselves as artists? Nietzsche obviously doesn’t think so; he explicitly declares that the artists will be among the permanently elite few (those who stand out from the herd of common men). So how are they supposed to be exemplary to others? Is the purpose of writing to expand the realm of the “elite”
or to seduce everyone into feeling as if they were among the chosen few? Identifying oneself as exceptional and misunderstood is not, after all, a very difficult demand to fulfill – the difficulty, as Nietzsche recognized, is how to avoid such identification and trafficking with enticing images for the self, with what is by definition a counterfeit greatness.

An interesting take on this comes from critic Malcolm Bull, whose provocatively titled book Anti-Nietzsche (expanded from his even more provocatively essay “Where is the Anti-Nietzsche?”) focuses on the literary question of “Nietzsche’s voice” as well as the question of how such an experimental work of literature is supposed to work upon readers. In spite of occasionally dubious readings, Bull at least establishes in a refreshing way the need for an “anti-Nietzsche.” He begins by asking, from a reader-response perspective, how we identify ourselves of reader we pointing out that Nietzsche’s readers are all too ready to be told that they are exceptional misfits and misunderstood, that their time will come.201 We have what Bull calls the option of “reading for victory” and the option of “reading like a loser” – two ways we might choose to read Nietzsche, two images of ourselves we might identify with. As Bull notes, the only way to be a “true” Nietzschean is to reject the values he expounds – and that means, above all, aesthetic values. Hence, we get Malcolm Bull’s “anti-Nietzsche” who (if we follow the reverse logic of Ecce Homo) is both a philistine and a masochist.202 It is interesting that “reading like a loser” (as a modernist response to Nietzsche) entails a rejection of the premises of the avant garde and its creative-destructive, innovation-driven, make-it-new ethic. If we follow this logic through, then reading like a loser aligns the reader with an anti-anti-art stance.

201 Here is the text of the so-called “Apple manifesto,” which originally appeared in an advertising campaign for Apple Computers in 1997:

Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can praise them, disagree with them, quote them, disbelieve them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can’t do is ignore them. Because they change things. They invent. They imagine. They heal. They explore. They create. They inspire. They push the human race forward. Maybe they have to be crazy. How else can you stare at an empty canvas and see a work of art? Or sit in silence and hear a song that’s never been written? Or gaze at a red planet and see a laboratory on wheels? While some see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.

202 It is essentially a version of the Liar Paradox – a paradox we might also attribute to Groucho Marx, who “did not want to be belong to any organization that would have him as a member.”
In my view, the reader-response dialectic that Bull identifies is ultimately a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of this way of framing the problem of the way writing works upon the reader. Nevertheless, Bull raises some basic and (I think) important questions about the kinds of contradictions and textual instabilities that Nietzsche takes on. \textit{Ecce Homo} is a “limit text” in much the same way Nietzsche pursues a “limit philosophy” (or “anti-philosophy”). We also see something approaching a schematic outline of the transgressive, oppositional logic of the modernist avant-garde. Nietzsche, however, was less interested in a programmatic aversion to conformity than in \textit{testing} how far one could go with the dissolution of the specular self. Nietzsche takes this experiment perhaps as far as it can be taken. This transgressive logic, the binaries with their inversions, represents what I believe is a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of the transgressive logic of the avant-garde and its concept of art as performative, exemplary spectacle. But while \textit{Ecce Homo} dramatizes the limits of the transgressive model that Nietzsche’s other work would help to inspire, it also points the way toward some different paths to take.

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For a self-styled prophet of a new age who asked followers to reject him so that they could heroically bring into existence the values by which they could be assessed, Nietzsche was also quite concerned – even obsessed – about possible future misreadings, about people \textit{misreading} him, which is perhaps an unavoidable problem for someone who seeks to be an exemplary destiny without offering a fixed ideal or image of heroism with which to identify:

The word “overman,” as the designation of a type of supreme achievement, as opposed to “modern” men, to “good” men, to Christians and other nihilists – a word that in the mouth of a Zarathustra, the annihilator of morality, becomes a very pensive word – has been understood almost everywhere with the utmost innocence in the sense of those very values whose opposite Zarathustra was meant to represent – that is an “idealistic” type of a higher kind of man, half “saint” and half “genius.” (\textit{Basic Writings} 717)
Do not read me, Nietzsche seems to be saying, but if you do – try to interpret my meaning correctly. Zarathustra “was meant to represent” values that were misinterpreted as designating the opposite so-called “modern” and “good” men. The scare-quote-laced passage above, take from the closing pages of Ecce Homo, shows an even more intensely self-conscious effort to distance itself (himself) from the conventional and accepted meanings of words, the meanings given to them by the “herd.” For Nietzsche, “Overman” was an “ominous” in part because he was keenly aware that the response to nihilism could take many different cultural forms.

The value-creating response that Nietzsche demonstrates arguably fails on its own terms. Nietzsche, like Whitman, is always implying and envisioning something else, an unrealized future and a future audience that will realize the values by which the Overman, the ultimate outsider-artist, will ultimately be judged. In Ecce Homo, however, the question of meaning that Nietzsche had hoped to overcome – along with distinctions between appearance and reality, surface versus depth – is simply transferred to Nietzsche himself: “Have I been understood?” The unstable irony we find throughout Ecce Homo, particularly in its closing pages, makes this culminating question almost impossible to interpret with any confidence. But even the effort and performance of sustaining this level of irony generates its own kind of idealism. It also generates a pathos, which derives largely from Nietzsche’s own failure to escape the idealism he had clearly wanted to escape (that intention, at least, is clear enough). In this final work, assessing a life’s work, we find occasional traces of Prufrock: “that is not what I meant to say, that is not it at all.” Nietzsche’s exploding hero is an explosante fixe, or at least a prophetic mode of anticipatory heroism that shows distinct signs of paralysis.203

In the end, the idealizing of exceptional heroism, and an exceptionalist longing for the New World that allows us to forget the old, produces an even more intense version of the pathos and idealism that Nietzsche had wanted to escape. Nietzsche’ proto-avant-garde pathos finds a poignant echo in the famous poem “Toujours” by Guillaume Apollinaire, one of Nietzsche’s most important readers and “transmitters” in the following generation:

203 The term explosante-fixe (“fixed explosion”) alludes to the final line of André Breton’s 1937 book L’Amour Fou (Mad Love) which concludes with a backward-looking revised and version of the concluding line of his earlier novel Nadja that expands upon and qualifies the earlier sentiment: “La beauté convulsive sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstancielle, ou ne sera pas.” [“Convulsive beauty will be erotic-veiled, exploding-fixed, magical-circumstantial, or it will not be at all.”]
Et tant d'univers s'oublient
Quels sont les grands oublieurs
Qui donc saura nous faire oublier telle ou telle partie du monde
Où est le Christophe Colomb à qui l'on devra l'oubli d'un continent

Perdre
Mais perdre vraiment
Pour laisser place à la trouvaille
Perdre
La vie pour trouver la Victoire

And so many universes are forgotten
Then who are the great forgetters
And who will be able to make us forget this or that part of the world
Who is the Christopher Columbus to whom we will owe the forgetting of a Continent

To lose
But to lose truly
To make way for the windfall
To lose
Life in order to Triumph

This is a virtual catalog of Nietzschean and Emersonian themes: the idealizing of Becoming, a vaguely triumphalist nostalgia for the future, a dream of rebirth by means of self-erasure. In its idealizing mode, there is a messianic charge that involves a passive awaiting of the sublime Event that will transform us and. "I am ready to die out of nature," Emerson declares, "and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America." In Apollinaire's poem, we see distinct traces of Emerson's way of life by
abandonment, by way of Nietzsche. But there are also ominous traces of a new spin on the ideal of self-abandonment: The longed-for loss is “the windfall” to which we “give way,” a larger world-historical force of Progress to which we yield and submit.

As I have tried to suggest for the past two chapters, the real “American Nietzsche” (as the title of a recent study puts it\(^{204}\)) is Emerson – or, we might just as well say that Nietzsche is the “European Emerson.” Nietzsche’s impact on American thought in the early decades of the twentieth century is the phenomenon of the re-birth of Emersonian thought in a new cultural and historical context. James, of course, might also lay claim to the title of the American Nietzsche, although (as we have seen) with a number qualifications. James had the historical advantage of witnessing the earliest impact of Nietzsche in the 1890s. Ironically, given their close affinity as heirs to Emerson, we find surprisingly few references to Nietzsche in James, and many of those references to Nietzsche are misreadings that seem based on a fundamental misunderstanding or lack familiarity. At one point, James calls Nietzsche a morbid-minded “shrieking rat” and conlates him with Schopenhauer as examples of a European variety of self-absorbed, existential angst. On another occasion, however, James mounts a defense of Nietzsche against another misreading. In his review of Max Nordau’s book Degeneration soon after its appearance in English in 1895, James critiques Nordau’s perfectionist notion of “health” as “approximating a nullity.”\(^{205}\) And James takes Nordau to task for “abusing” Nietzsche when (in Degeneration) he dismisses Nietzsche’s philosophy as a symptom of cultural decadence. This seems to revise or at least complicate what James has to say about Nietzsche elsewhere. James’s critique of Nordau’s healthy-minded pessimism as a “pathological document” of an “individual temperament” is actually (even though James probably did not fully appreciate it in 1895) a prescient diagnosis of a larger cultural discourse on decadence in the 1890s that was beginning to form around misreadings of Nietzsche.\(^{206}\) James’s defense of Nietzsche in response to Nordau’s healthy-minded optimism is also a reminder that for James, as for Nietzsche,

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\(^{204}\) American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen.

\(^{205}\) See also Varieties of Religious Experience (24) for more of James on Nordau.

\(^{206}\) It is important note, however, that the late nineteenth-century discourse on decadence predates Nietzsche, whose own interest in the idea of cultural decadence owes something to the work of the French critic Paul Bourget in the 1880s.
instinct and fatalism are primary and must be distinguished from the secondary *attitudes* of pessimism and optimism (which Nietzsche dismisses as equally decadent).\textsuperscript{207}

James’s sharpest response to Nietzsche, in fact, may be found in his response to *Emerson*. James may have misread Nietzsche partly out of lack of familiarity\textsuperscript{208}; but he certainly does not misread Emerson. James and Nietzsche were two of Emerson’s closest readers. As we have seen, there are as many transfigurings and allusions to Emerson in James as there is in Nietzsche. And both knew how Emerson stood out from his contemporaries and immediate heirs in the nineteenth century. Here is a key passage from James’s 1902 address delivered on the centennial of Emerson’s birth:

“The deep today which all men scorn” receives thus from Emerson superb revindication. “*Other world! there is no other world.*” All God’s life opens into the individual particular, and here and now, or nowhere, is reality. “The present hour is the decisive hour, and every day is doomsday.” Such a conviction that Divinity is everywhere may easily make of one an optimist of the sentimental type that refuses to speak ill of anything. Emerson’s drastic perception of differences kept him at the opposite pole from this weakness. After you have seen men a few times, he could say, you find most of them as alike as their barns and pantries, and soon as musty and dreary. Never was such a fastidious lover of significance and distinction, and never an eye so keen for their discovery. His optimism had nothing in common with that indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe with which Walt Whitman has made us familiar… (*Pragmatism and Other Essays* 312)

There is nothing here that might not apply to Nietzsche as well; the Emerson that James describes above sounds strikingly similar to Nietzsche. There is full recognition here of Emerson’s programmatic contempt for what Nietzsche would call the “last man” (an attitude that may be found on occasion in James as well). James’s centennial address was written in 1902, after Nietzsche’s ideas had already spread in Europe,

\textsuperscript{207} In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes of Zarathustra that he “was the first to grasp that the optimist is just as decadent as the pessimist, and perhaps more harmful” (785).

\textsuperscript{208} This was not due to a language barrier: James, in fact, was fluent in German and did not need to wait for the appearance of Nietzsche’s books in English translation.
and in the year in which James’s Gifford Lectures were being published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In Lecture 2 of *Varieties*, James contrasts Emersonian “optimism” with Buddhist “pessimism.” In the centennial address, he makes it clear that Emerson’s optimism is of a special kind. For James, Emerson is an example of a life-affirming philosopher who (unlike Whitman) did not engage in mere optimism, or an “indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe.” One of James’s favorite “representative men” is Whitman, who served as recurring example of what James called the “healthy-minded” type. The passage on Emerson above is important, because it clearly distinguishes between Emerson and Whitman as representing two different types of healthy-minded “hurrahing for the universe. Emerson is neither an healthy-minded optimist nor a gloomy pessimist in the conventional sense; he is a healthy-minded fatalist. What James is identifying in his profile of Emerson is not a philosophical position or an “attitude” (like Whitman’s), but rather forms of life and strategy for avoiding despair and converting the recognition of nihilism into a form of power. What James calls Emerson’s “here and now, or nowhere” is a particular form of active nihilism, a healthy-minded response that is quite different from (but nevertheless stands in contrast to) Nordau’s ideal of health as “approximating a nullity.”

The alternative to Whitman’s egalitarian optimism, James notes, is a sharp sense of “discrimination.” This has moral and ethical connotations of which was also quite aware. Elsewhere in his address, James mentions Emerson’s notoriously ambivalent response to the abolitionist movement. Like Nietzsche, Emerson is not exactly a champion of egalitarian democratic values, nor does he endorse the “improvers of mankind” of whom Nietzsche speaks with such contempt.). Note James’s keen

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209 The classic (and much disputed) critique of Emerson’s “discriminating” individualism, mad from an ethical and political vantage point, is Quentin Anderson’s *The Imperial Self* (an argument he would later revise and qualify in his *Making Americans*).

210 Emerson’s comment on the abolition movement sounds the same tone that we encounter in a passage in “Experience,” where Emerson dismisses the social experiment of Brook Farm and its radical utopian aspirations:

> At Education-Farm, [Brook Farm] the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy ... a political orator wittily compared our party promises to western roads, which opened stately enough, with planted trees on either side, to tempt the traveller, but soon became narrower and narrower, and ended in a squirrel track, and ran up a tree. (478)

The relish with which Emerson, on more than one occasion, mocks the aspirations behind political reform demonstrates how an agreeable and homespun aversion to “theories of life” can lead one toward an aloof and unseemly political quietism, even toward a reactionary politics (though Emerson never goes quite that far). For a classic discussion of Emerson’s problematic politics, see George Kateb.
perception of the paradoxes within Emerson’s radical individualism, his celebration of “distinction” over conformity, and even the anti-democratic and aristophiliac tendency in Emerson with its paradoxical twin fantasies of an “aboriginal” and aristocratic exceptionalism.\footnote{The examples are numerous. There is the notorious passage in Emerson in which Emerson extends the “know your facts from others” and asks why he should engage in charity, which is a version of what he says passage on not helping drowning swimmers. During the Civil War, Emerson also anticipates Nietzsche’s glorification of the “warlike” and the Futurists’ more explicit talk of war as a cultural “hygiene”: “Civil war, national bankruptcy, or revolution,” Emerson writes in The Conduct of Life, are “more rich in the central tones than languid years of prosperity.” [p. 230 in older edition]}

In “Self Reliance,” for example, Emerson writes of “the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say ought to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature.”\footnote{In a sharply worded critique of Stein’s wartime book Wars I Have Seen, Djuna Barnes (perhaps unintentionally) echoes this line from Emerson: “You do not feel that she [Stein] is ever really worried about the sorrows of the people. Her concerns at its highest pitch is a well-fed apprehension.” Stein, along with Alice Toklas, spent the war years in protected seclusion in Vichy France, devoting much of her time to collecting and translations the speeches of Marshal Petain.} As this profile of Emerson illustrates, we might say that James’s “drastic perception of differences” between temperaments and total reactions upon life, and his treatment of them as distinct land “live” options, is what sets him apart from both Emerson and Nietzsche and their programmatic approach to a particular “way of life by abandonment.” It is a critical power, a sense of discrimination, and at the same time a visionary power of holding open future possibilities.

It is only in Varieties of Religious Experience that we see a conscious distancing from both Emerson and Nietzsche. James quotes at length from Emerson, offering him as an example of a “secular religion.” It is here, in this passage, that James writes of the “thumping its breast and flexing its muscles,” which is the same language he uses to characterize the healthy-minded positivist (Varieties 36-38). Emerson is a central figure in Varieties of Religious Experience, and not simply one example among others of the healthy-minded type. If James recognizes what sets Emerson apart from sentimental optimists, then why does he nevertheless classify him as a healthy-minded type and identify himself with the opposite type? Is this a misreading, like James’s misreading of Nietzsche? I do not think so. James was quite familiar with Emerson. And his recognition of the Emersonian religion, as well as his distancing from it, is a rather misunderstood part pf his thinking.

And there is also the shadow of Emerson cast over James studies, in which James is either not as radical as his mentor (as Cavell claims) or is simply a disciple elaborating upon his thought (as
numerous studies exemplify). Joan Richardson, for example, begins her chapter on James in *A Natural History of Pragmatism* by telling the story of how Emerson, a friend of Henry James Sr., was present at the birth of William at blessed him. This is an extreme example of the dominance of the Emersonian paradigm for reading James (and others). James wrote that some people are born with a corked bottle of champagne with their name inscribed on it; for many Emersonian critics, James was also born under the sign of Emerson. Other Emersonian critics respond to this conflict simply by glossing over it. Steven Meyer, for example, merely points out how James fails to acknowledge Emerson’s genuine experiences of loss, in particular the biographical fact Emerson’s suffering over the death of his son. Such literal and biographical readings simply miss the point of James’s discussion of the Sick Souled versus the Healthy Minded. For James, moreover, Emerson was not simply an individual case, one example of a general universal temperament; rather, Emerson was responsible for the articulation of one compelling response to the challenge of nihilism (in ways that I have tried to outline in this chapter). If we want to read James biographically, the there is a generational dimension to James’s ambivalence toward conversion experiences. Note in passing that the final passage in the Sick Soul is also “personal” in the sense that he responds to the Emersonian “Always convert!” thinking of his parents’ generation.\(^{213}\) It is a generational critique, not simply a misreading of Emerson. It is in fact sharp and perceptive reading of *Emersonian* thought. James was as averse to conversion narratives as he was to organized religion, and in this respect he fully shares Nietzsche’s sense of the problem.

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the question for James is not acknowledging the “reality of evil,” but the kind of meaning we give to these obstacles that we treat as “realities.” This includes the question of how these “difficulties” are projected obstacles or as challenges that are “ministerial to higher good.” The recognition of the “reality of evil” for James is thus not a recognition of the way the world resists our projects, thus serving as a test of reality, but rather a recognition that the world exists in something other than an instrumental relation to us and that contain evils that are not simply opportunities that are “ministerial to higher good.”

\(^{213}\) note the allusion to his father.
There are important reasons for paying close attention to James’s philosophical divergence from Emerson and for taking issue with narrowly biographical readings. Nietzsche and Emerson become the logic of the avant garde, what Cavell calls “aversive thinking.” This passage from James Albrecht (as an example of this avant-garde reading):

Emerson, Nietzsche, and James each renounce traditional religion’s promise of certain meaning behind (and compensating for) the sufferings of our world, in favor of a view that accepts the limits and failures of material life as real and unrecoverable losses—*losses that are meaningful, however, indeed necessary and beneficial, as occasions for human performance and power.* (147 [italics added])

Like much of Emersonian criticism, this is little more than Emerson’s philosophy paraphrased in a more amiable and domesticated academic prose. Consider Emerson’s casual (or reticent?) comment in “Experience”: “We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual.” They have been our chief experiences because they are the bleak rocks around which we form our reactions upon life. They are “ministerial to a higher good” and are the “measles and mumps of the soul.” This is the language of conversion. Emerson writes that he rejects the matter of Montaigne in favor of his method; but Montaigne’s method is to pay close attention (reflective and critical attention, if not “intellectual”) to the way people go about their business. Emerson differs from James’s *moralisme:* “The whole frame of things preaches indifference. Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy.” However, James like Montaigne was interested in the way people go about their business.

But not only are they occasions for human power; through Nietzsche in particular, they also give us a mandate for transgressive iconoclasm—and that is a particular way of life by abandonment. The question is what *kind* of power and what kind of performance we are talking about. The point here is not their realization of loss, their amor fati, but the particular and practical ways in which they embrace it and find a way to convert it into a “meaningful” opportunity for particular activity and the realization of a certain *kind* of power. We might even say that the will to live and orient oneself meaningfully precedes the will to
“practical power” in these other senses.\textsuperscript{214} The fact that pragmatist criticism so often makes statements like this without concrete notions of what kind of power we are talking about suggests its limitations in offering an alternative to the epistemic values it critiques.

The problem, for James, is not “accepting the limits and failures of material life,” not the reality of evil and loss, but the way we develop ways of coping with and giving meaning to a world that lacks intrinsic meaning – how we adopt and adapt and develop possible responses to the questions posed to us by developing meaningful orientations and forms of life. Viewing the fallen world as offering occasions for (displaying) human performance and power represents a distinct lifeworld that is just as “real” as the fundamental truth of extinction, the reality of “cosmic aloneness,” the reality of the unrecoverable losses, or anything else we choose to treat as an objective given. Though it is at all an easy one, all James demands of us is that we recognize the reality of lifeworlds (total reactions upon life) as on the same par with everything else (along with the reality of transitions, etc.).

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If we encounter in Nietzsche and Emerson the paradox of an experimental fatalism, in James we must try to understand how his mode of description (in Varieties) can be experimental at all, let alone radical. In Varieties, James claims that “morbid-mindedness” is the more comprehensive and ranges over, etc.. James's melancholy allows him to see in melancholy a different kind of “power.” And we can say already that it is more “comprehensive” than Nietzsche’s. We might compare James’s “comprehensive” with Nietzsche’s power to “comprehend,” a neat parallel to the power to make distinctions. One demonstration of the power of James’s more comprehensive melancholy view, then, is that he is able to “comprehend” this healthy-minded view as a strategy for making meaning and as a life world, and to recognize its limitations. This, again, is what allows us to think of James as a modernist critic of the avant garde. Finally, mention Nietzsche’s comment that Emerson had a “skepsis full of possibilities” – that Emerson had this practical power and had helped him to cope and to find a way to a way. In the next chapter, I will look at this “power” of recognizing possible lifeworlds, the “prescience” that comes with treating orientations as primary. In Chapter Two, I tried to argue for a reading of James that

\textsuperscript{214} Nietzsche: One would rather will nothing than not will at all”
does not identify him with any particular philosophy, any definition of the world. In the next chapter, I will look at James’s argument for the power of a melancholy orientation on non-epistemic grounds. If we are going to think of the experimental implications of James’s “philosophy of ‘if’” (as Joan Richardson titles one of her chapters,) then we need to combine it with a Jamesian sense of possible lifeworlds, or what we might call James and Wittgenstein’s philosophy of “as if.”
Epilogue: After Nietzsche: Reading Robert Walser

No sun, no culture, me, naked, on a high rock, no storms, not even a wave, no water, no wind, no streets, no banks, no money, no time, and no breath. Then, at least, I should not be afraid any more. No more fear and no more questions, and I should not be late any more, either. I could imagine that I was lying in bed, everlastingly in bed! Perhaps that would be the best thing.

Walser, “Helbling’s Story” (42)

I want to return briefly to the question I asked in my introduction: What does it mean to say (as Max Brod did) that “after Nietzsche, there had to be Walser”? I first want to look at a passage in Walser’s late novel The Robber that contains an explicit reference to Nietzsche, and (indeed) one could make the case that the entire passage is an obliquely comic but at the same time rather profound meditation on Nietzschean themes. The Robber is the only surviving novel from Walser’s late and intensely productive “pencil period,” work composed in the 1920s in the years leading up to his institutionalization. In its comically circuitous and nonlinear fashion, The Robber narrates the story of its central character (who is actually the narrator himself) in what might be described as a “mock-saturnine” mode. By comparison, Walser’s tonal complexity can make even Ecce Homo sound at times like the straightforward rhetoric of Cardinal Newman – this is a novel that begins, after all, with the line: “Edith loves him. More on this later.” Virginia Woolf speculated that the literature of illness (or the post-convalescent), that it will probably be “laughable.” Walser certainly is that. There are many possible adjectives to describe the complex tone and structure of The Robber, and “zany” must be included among them.

We also encounter in The Robber something rarely found in Walser: a reference to a current event involving a contemporary public figure. Alongside the mention of Nietzsche, Walser alludes to the famously melancholic statesman and writer Walther Rathenau, who served as Foreign Minister of Germany during the early years of the Weimar Republic, and who was assassinated on June 24, 1922 by right-wing ultra-nationalists.215 The scene narrated in the novel takes place, presumably, in the days

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215 Following his assassination, Rathenau was widely viewed as a heroic martyr for German democracy. Monuments were erected to his memory, streets in German cities named after him. When the Nazis
immediately following the assassination when the news would have reached the attention of the general public. Walser's Robber hears news of the assassination while he is out in the countryside, far from the centers of commerce and politics and world-changing events. The narrated episode is chiefly concerned with making sense of the Robber's unusual response upon hearing the news. Addressing the reader in the second-person, Walser's narrator informs us of the context of the day's earlier events leading up to the event of the Robber's response – a response, incidentally, which has not yet been described for us. We must wait for the disclosure of that information; we are often made to wait in The Robber. “First,” the narrator declares, “why don't we take a stroll with [the Robber] up the Gurten, a mountain in the immediate vicinity. And I see no reason why we should not, up there in the mountain air, talk our fill of politics” (11). But before we set out on this imagined stroll, the narrator reflects upon the personal health benefits of a well-oxygenated attentiveness: “How alert we are, keeping watch in all directions. Some people might suppose this to be terribly exhausting, but just the opposite is true. There is something wonderfully refreshing about being attentive, whereas inattentiveness puts one to sleep” (11). The mountain air and the concern with health and vigor are all familiar motifs in Nietzsche, and the entire comment echoes Nietzsche's self-reflexive realization that “everything in me became subtler – observation itself as well as all organs of observation.” As the narrated account of the episode resumes, we are finally told what the Robber's response was. We also get an even more direct allusion to Nietzsche, to the image of Zarathustra descending from (here, “tripping down from”) his extended period solitude up in the mountains.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ In yet another complex allusion to Nietzsche, the narrator relates earlier in the passage that the Robber “had a masterful understanding of how to be unspeakably unhappy while listening to music, and since this presented a mortal danger for sensitive souls, a grammar school teacher was sent along with him as a chaperone, his duty being to shadow him until he caught him in the act. Such a guardian, or rather guard, said to Orlando [the Robber]: ‘Rather weak in religion, eh?’ and smiled in resignation.”

It's ten in the morning, he comes tripping down from the light green meadows back to town, where a placard informs him of Rathenau's murder, and what did this marvelous, weird scoundrel do now? He clapped his hands, when he ought to have sunk to the
ground in horror and grief at this shattering announcement. I’d like to see someone
explain this hand-clapping to us. (11)

The narrator himself then takes a crack at it, which sends him off on a circuitous and digressive endeavor
at “explaining” the response of his alter ego — essentially playing the double role of inquisitor and
advocate. This hand-clapping response, the narrator speculates, is “perhaps related to a spoon.” More
on this later, apparently. But first, a few more words from our narrator by way of digression. In a delay
tactic entirely typical of the book, we are first presented with a brief non-sequitur of a personal anecdote
involving either the narrator or the Robber (one of many instances where the distinction is far from clear).
We then return to the psychological inquiry into the circumstances that might account in some way for the
Robber’s unconventional response to the news of Rathenau’s murder:

This heavenly air on the mountain, the deep-breathing exercises in the fir forest, and then
the additional pleasure of being able to read of a great man’s downfall at the hands of a
few insignificant persons. For is not, as Friedrich Nietzsche has pointed out, witnessing
and participating vicariously in a tragedy a delight of the finest and highest order, an
enrichment of life? “Bravo!” he even shouted, on top of everything else, and hereafter
betook himself to a café. (11)

Nearly a page after it was first mentioned, we return to the matter of the spoon and the spoon-licking
episode. The terse mention of this act is almost entirely obscured by the scene-painting and the overly
devout pursuit of precision (a precision that slips into poetry and contains more than a hint of special
pleading):

You see, before he’d resolved to climb the Gurten — god of precision, give me the
strength to recount everything down to the fliespecks — he licked, thinking himself her
page boy, the widow’s little spoon. In her kitchen it was. In this kitchen reigned a vast,
splendid loneliness, a midsummer seclusion, and perhaps, the day before, the Robber
had seen, in the display window of a shop that sold books and art prints, a reproduction of the picture *Le baiser derobé* by Fragonard. This painting can only have enraptured him. It truly is, in fact, one of the most delightful pictures ever painted. (12)

The spoon-licking, then, may be connected with the hand-clapping. Once the spoon-licking is adduced as a possible factor, however, it is rapidly subsumed within yet another epicycle of causal explanation, folded into a further layer of context, as the narrator submits as evidence a hypothetical (imagined) encounter with a painting. This “explanation” is elaborated with a curiously subjunctive mode of precision: perhaps he had seen a painting the day before that “*can only have enraptured him.*” The syntax of the sentence — “In her kitchen it was” — reflects both the care and the voyeuristic relish with which he reconstructs the hypothetical scene.\(^{217}\) *Yes, in her kitchen,* he seems to say with the speculative relish of the voyeur, *that is where he must have seen it.* From the reconstructive language of the forensics investigator, the narrator modulates to the more freely speculative language that a prosecuting attorney might employ as he asks the jury to reconstruct the scene of a crime in their mind’s eye. Walser’s narrator, as is already clear, assumes the role of both prosecution and defense. We, the readers, are asked to imagine the possible motives of the suspect as well as the atmospheric properties of the scene of the crime (the scene of the spoon-licking now taking the place of the hand-clapping as the “crime” to be explained). But we are also asked to admit into the record, as evidence both circumstantial and extenuating, what appears to be an “objective” value judgment: *because, after all, it is in fact — as everyone knows — one of the most delightful pictures ever painted.* In other words, it is hard to imagine anyone who is *not* guilty of being “enraptured” by such a painting.

We might pause here to consider this passage in light of Malcolm Bull’s anti-Nietzsche as the adoption of a philistine attitude. Should we read Walser here as offering a parody of Nietzschean aestheticism, as a parody of anti-art philistinism, or as a reveling in a certain kind of philistinism understood as a nose-thumbing, anti-art stance? We cannot even begin to answer (or admit) such a question unless we acknowledge that the text is working on at least two levels of ironic detachment. The narrator, like the Robber, seems to have a taste for scenic atmosphere (the “vast, splendid loneliness of

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\(^{217}\) The English translation can, of course, easily reproduce the inverted syntax of the original German.
the kitchen”) as well as a “masterful understanding” of how to be “unspeakably unhappy” so as to intensify the pleasure he takes in this unhappiness. He is unabashedly sentimental. The aestheticism that Walser indulges in here has affinities with the philistinism of Leopold Bloom, for whom works of art – parts of the anatomy of sculpted figures – offer a stimulus for the erotic fantasies of the daydreamer. The narrator finds the painting by Fragonard “delightful,” it seems, because its subject matter suits his fetishistic predilections. But we need to distinguish here, as we obviously do in the case of Joyce, between the theme level and the level of craft. And there is ample evidence throughout this passage (and elsewhere in The Robber) of a seriously playful crafting of possible identifications, a conscious intent behind the intentionality that is modeled and the modes of desire that are entertained.

As the kitchen scene continues, we then encounter yet another characteristically abrupt shift, with an oddly syllogistic-sounding demonstration of the logic of the fetish as a metonymic-chain of associations:

And now, apart from him, there wasn’t a soul in the kitchen. Beside the sink reposed, adream in its cup, the spoon the widow had used when she drank her coffee. “This little spoon has been placed by her in her mouth. Her mouth is as lovely as a picture. Everything else about her is a hundred times less lovely than precisely her mouth, so how could I hesitate to pay homage to this loveliness by kissing, as it were, this spoon?”

(12)

“Such,” Walser’s narrator comments, “were his literary observations.” The Robber’s observations do not rise to the level of explanation, let alone justification. This transparent tactic thus undermines the value of this testimony (in spite of its effort to be candid and precise). But while he attributes these thoughts to the Robber, the narrator himself is just as guilty of participating in this chain of pseudo-logical association that revels in the conflation of reasons with motives, a blurring that is facilitated by the projective mode of personification: a dreaming spoon at rest in a cup, a kitchen in which there “reigned a vast splendid loneliness.”
At this point, we have now followed the shaggy dog some distance in pursuit of an explanation for the hand-clapping. The more dots that appear in this constellation of possible factors, the more difficult it is to connect them. Does everything else about the woman become less lovely because of the chance encounter with the spoon? Does the painting give him an analogy for the beauty of her mouth, which links with the spoon? This “almost comic” logic of juxtaposition is Walser’s version of Eliot’s reading of Spinoza juxtaposed with the smell of cooking, or Surrealism’s chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella:

It’s almost comic, this juxtaposition of a widow’s household utensils and major current events of historical significance. On the one hand, a coffee cup episode, the actions of a page boy in sweet domesticity; on the other, a news item that sent quakes and tremblings throughout the civilized world. (13)

In a highly significant delay tactic and withholding of evidence, the narrator finally comes around to considering this chance event of possible relevance: the “confession” that Rathenau and the Robber had once met by chance in a public place, after which they spent an afternoon together discussing various shared interests.

To this we now add the following confession: Rathenau and the Robber were personally acquainted. During their promenade, islands, poets, and so on were discussed, and now came this horrifying report, to which the Robber responded: “What a splendid way to end a career!” Possibly, of course, he thought something else as well. But there was, above all, something we’ll call charming in the way he stood there before this supremely

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218 See Susan Bernofsky’s preface to The Robber, p. xi. Bernofsky quotes from a very late story written in 1932/33 called “The Girl,” which concludes with the following complex inversion of vehicle and tenor: “Small birds were trilling in the treetops, the sun shone down the avenue, people strolled to and fro, and water swam past the girl. She was grateful to the sun, the twittering she found delightful, and the people she compared to the water that came and went.”

219 The line appears in Eliot’s 1921 essay on the Metaphysical Poets.

220 See Jochen Greven for more on Walser’s real-life encounter with Rathenau.
affecting notice, which, as it were, had something joyous and Greek about it, something of the vividness of ancient sagas. (13)

This touches directly upon Nietzschean themes, and even goes so far as to borrow Nietzsche’s own language.

We do not know the something else which he possibly thought as well, but we are informed by way of anecdote of his fantasy of being “girlishly” submissive. We then suddenly shift to another “fact” that is no longer presented, but seems another attempt to account for this Nietzschean exhilaration in terms of identifying with the opposite of “joyous” tragic failure – namely, a giddy and “girlish” submissiveness: “Already in Berlin, the Robber had once behaved in a truly girlish manner. This occurred at a gentlemen’s social gathering.” He then recounts the incident at some length, at which point this whirlwind of a section (a densely packed two pages) comes to a close.

The masochism or surrender theme deserves much more attention than I am able to devote to it here. But I do want to suggest that Walser is at his most Nietzschean when he is exploring and trying out new affective orientations as potential sources of pleasure and power. Like Nietzsche, Walser is less interested in the pleasure afforded by imaginary power relations (inverting and subverting roles in a psychic economy structured around a dominant/submissive dialectic) as he is in the testing out of forms of pleasure as forms of power.

“Essay on Freedom”

Next, I want to look at one of Walser’s most explicitly philosophical (and Nietzschean-themed) pieces, the “Essay on Freedom” of 1928, an essay that further explores the theme of submissiveness. This is a brief but important late piece, which I think demonstrates a clear link between Walser’s essayism and Nietzsche’s aesthetic concept of amor fati as a precondition for the creation of value. What we read initially sounds like a quirky and quasi-dialectical meditation on freedom (perhaps even a conscious allusion to Hegel’s master/slave dialectic), but presented here in reflexive rather than psychological terms:

\[\text{See Emmanuel Ghent for a classic and particularly Jamesian psychological account of masochism and what Ghent calls “surrender.”}\]
One should always be bowing inwardly to the pure image of freedom; there must be no pause in one’s respect for freedom, a respect which seems to bear a persistent relation to a kind of fear. A remarkable thing here is that freedom sets out to be single, tolerates no other freedoms beside itself. Although this can certainly be said with greater precision I quickly take occasion to insist that I am a person who tends to appear to himself more frail than perhaps he actually is. (Selected Stories 181)

As William James might put it, Walser’s first act of free will is to act as if there were free will. But Walser does not stop there. He embraces freedom as a test of his character and a paradoxical constraint upon his freely conceived actions, “allowing” himself to be “positively governed by freedom, so to speak oppressed by it, to be regulated by it in every imaginable way.” Construed in this paradoxical way, “freedom” begins to sound like a synonym for the “terrible demand” of Nietzschean nihilism. Walser personifies and objectifies freedom, contemplating freedom as a necessary stimulus and constraint for his own contemplative activity. In that way, contemplation gets converted into an active and value-creating mode of articulation. Walser considers “with a humility which cannot of course be free from decorous irony, the droll possibility that, within freedom, puzzles are thinkable” (182). Not solvable, but thinkable: puzzles that come into view as obstacles to navigate, objective stimuli the response to which allows for the active exercise of subjective agency. He then relates the story of returning home one day from a journey (perhaps one of the long walks Walser liked to take) and seeing from a distance what appear to be two people, a man and a woman, looking down at him from the window of his room. The two parties gaze at each other for a long time, but when he goes up to his room he finds nobody there. “For a time,” Walser writes, “I do not sense my own person either, I am pure independence, which is not in every way quite what it ought to be, and I ask myself if I am free” (182).

The “Essay on Freedom” ends with a syntactically odd sentence whose self-permissions formed around a self-imposed mandate for precision, is a vivid example of the powers realized through self-reflexive articulation:
I hope I may be believed if I permit myself to say that freedom is difficult and produces
difficulties, with which phrase perhaps there sprang from my mouth an insight the
expression of which could be accomplished by none but a connoisseur and gourmet of
freedom who notes and cherishes all of the unfreedoms internal to freedom. (183)

There is a quiet sense of discovery and self-surprise here, and he once again assumes a disengaged
stance toward his own body (a phrase “sprang from [his] mouth”). But I want to draw special attention
here to the oddly baroque syntax of this sentence, with its nested qualifications and self reflexive
contortions. The filigree work of the syntax performs a definite function, I think, that is quite different from
the pleasures of merely circulating among the elaborate arabesques of decorum. The writer does not
convey an insight; he arrives at an insight, the expression of which could only be accomplished by
someone who, we might say, is a connoisseur of what is made possible by his own acts of articulation.
This is Nietzsche’s quod erat demonstrandum that paradoxically discovers what it set out to prove,
arriving at a proof in the filigree work of its own demonstration. We might compare this, for example, with
the passage in Ecce Homo that we looked at in Chapter Five, which concludes with a similar act of self-
reflexive identification: “Well, I have just described myself.”

On Two Readings of Walser: Benjamin and Sebald

Reading Walser “after Nietzsche” does make a real difference, I would argue, in the way we
interpret his writing. In “Le Promeneur Solitaire,” his 1998 essay on Walser, W.G. Sebald speculates that
“it must have occurred to [Walser] on more than one occasion that the looming threat of impending
darkness enabled him at times to arrive at an acuity of observation and precision of formulation which is
unattainable from a state of perfect health” (28). Walser may or may not have seen farther or with
precision than others, but I think he is guided by interests besides lucidity and precision per se. I think it
is more accurate to say that Walser treats the demand for precision, often in Walser an explicitly self-
imposed demand, as the basis of a method, not as a means of seeing more clearly into the life of things.
Walter Benjamin’s reading of Walser, in his much earlier essay of 1929, further complicates our way of reading Walser. Perhaps Benjamin is even challenging some of his own assumptions. Benjamin wrote his essay on Walser the year he was admitted to Waldau. It is a short essay, and one might wish it were longer, or at least as long as his more fully developed treatments of Proust and Kafka. But in its brief space, Benjamin makes a series of assays at understanding the puzzle that is Robert Walser. Benjamin flirts with the idea of reading Walser as an outsider artist,\footnote{In \textit{The Robber}, Walser’s narrator even addresses the reader in a Jamesian voice: “Don’t persist in reading nothing but healthy books, acquaint yourselves also with so-called pathological literature, from which you may derive considerable edification. Healthy people should always, so to speak, take certain risks. For what other reason, blast and confound it, is a person healthy? Simply in order to stop living one day at the height of one’s health? A damned bleak fate” (59).} a provocation from the periphery simply by virtue of positioning himself \textit{at} the periphery, someone who chooses to be minor writer, a writer’s writer, standing apart from the “imperialist” aspirations of great and important writers like Thomas Mann, who wrote on large themes in large forms. Few people understand the “minor genre” of the ephemeral feuilleton, Benjamin writes, or “realize how many butterflies of hope are repelled by the insolent, rocklike façade of so-called great literature, seeking refuge instead in its unpretentious calyxes” (109). Benjamin then slips for a moment into the polemical mode of his “Leftist Melancholy” and attacks what he imagines to be one possible response of the reading public to writing such as Walser’s: “The first of impulse of their meager store of cultural knowledge – their sole asset in literary matters – tells them that what they regard as the complete insignificance of content has to be compensated for by their ’cultivated,’ ’refined’ attention to form” (109). Although it is not mentioned explicitly, this may also be read, at least in part, as a challenge to the pastoral gaze of Surrealism and its attention to formal features, as exemplified by the approach of Prinzhorn or Morgenthaler. But Benjamin is not quite ready to exit the interpretive frame of Outsider Art paradigm completely.\footnote{It is Benjamin who also writes of Walser’s characters (which are most often first-person narrators) that they come from “insanity and nowhere else. They are figures who have left madness behind them, and this is why they are marked by such a consistently heartrending, inhuman superficiality. If we were to attempt to sum up in a single phrase the delightful yet also uncanny element in them, we would have to say: they have all been healed (112).} He latches on for a moment to the rumor that Walser never revised a sentence, a fact that might qualify him for entry into the exclusive realm of Outsider Artists. The “chaotic scatteredness” of Walser’s writing, Benjamin suggests, is in fact a “sign of stamina” and purpose. In the end, Benjamin abandons the notion of an authenticating absence of self-conscious style. “What we find in Robert Walser,” he writes, “is a neglect of style that is quite
extraordinary and that is also hard to define.” In a Wittgensteinian call for an intentionality without
interpretable *intent*, Benjamin rejects the attempt to interpret “mysteries of [Walser’s] style” – the brooding
fixation upon some underlying intention, conscious or not, that must be interpreted (along the lines of
Freud’s reading of Da Vinci). “For we are accustomed,” he continues, “to ponder the mysteries of style
through the contemplation of more or less elaborate, fully intended works of art, whereas here we find
ourselves confronted by a seemingly quite unintentional, but attractive, even fascinating linguistic
wilderness.” Benjamin then repeats his important qualification: “Seemingly unintentional, we said. Critics
have sometimes disagreed about whether this is really so. But it is a fruitless quarrel, as we perceive
when we recall Walser’s admission that he never corrected a single line in his writing. We do not have to
believe this, but we would be well advised to do so. For we can set our minds at rest by realizing that to
write yet never correct what has been written implies both the absence of intention as well as the most
fully considered intentionality.”

While nothing in this passage lends itself to quotation in the form a
back-cover blurb or as an aphoristic assessment, I think these are nevertheless Benjamin’s most
perceptive comments on Walser. They also happen to be the most Nietzschean as well as the most
Jamesian in spirit.

**A Passage from “The Walk”**

I want to turn finally to a passage in Walser’s celebrated story “The Walk,” which is in some ways
an extended and dramatized “essay on freedom.” “The Walk” concludes with an elegiac, country
churchyard scene at end of day. The narrator feels weary after a long and physically taxing walk, and it is
also beginning to get dark: these are the boundary conditions, bodily and atmospherically, that make
possible his final vision. He arrives at a quiet side road that runs under trees toward a lake. He
encounters the two ghostly figures once again. This time, however, one of them is the image of a “weary

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224 Although it is quite differently phrased, I take what Benjamin says here to be the underlying sentiment of Adorno’s comment in “Essay as Form” that essay writing “takes the matter of presentation more seriously than do those procedures that separate out method from material and are indifferent to the way they represent their objectified contents. The *how* of expression should rescue, in precision, what the refusal to outline sacrifices” (160 [italics in original]). Adorno then calls Benjamin an “unequaled master” of this form of essayism.
old forsaken man whom I had seen a few days before, lying on the ground in the forest.” The other image is that of a beautiful girl:

As I walked slowly onward, two human figures arose in my mind. Perhaps because of a certain general weariness, I thought of a beautiful girl, and of how alone I was in the wide world, and that this could not be quite right. Self-reproof touched me from behind my back and stood before me in my way, and I had to struggle hard. (Selected Stories 105)

Now he must struggle with memories and the threat of being overwhelmed by the sense of imagined possibilities and feelings of regret over things undone and things that were done and that caused harm to others. It begins to rain, and the narrator suddenly feels impelled to search for flowers. He notices schoolchildren gathered with their teacher for a outdoor botany lesson. This observation sets him off to a “scientific” observation of his own melancholy frame of mind, a reflexive monitoring of changes in his mental weather that tests out (and takes command of) these subtle shifts in mood as they place him in relation to the world that comes into view. “As I looked at earth and air and sky,” he writes, “the melancholy unquestioning thought came to me that I was a poor prisoner between heaven and earth, that all men were miserably imprisoned in this way, that for all men” (106). His provisional imagining coalesces around and forms in response to this unquestioning thought, which functions as a stimulus only when it is provisionally allowed its dogmatic status as a “given.” Then we get a sudden shift in voice, in quoted language, as the narrator launches into a meditation on transience:

“So then everything, everything, all this rich life, the friendly, thoughtful colors, this delight, this joy and pleasure in life, all these human meanings, family, friend, and beloved, this bright, tender air full of divinely beautiful images, houses of fathers, houses of mothers, and dear gentle roads, must one day pass away and die, the high sun, the moon, and the hearts and eyes of men.” (106)
These are thoughts, just thoughts, entertained provisionally; he is less interested in the “truth of extinction” than in where this language takes him and what modes of consciousness it opens up and makes possible. “For a long time,” he says, “I thought of this, and asked those people whom perhaps I might have injured to forgive me. For a long time I lay there in unclear thought, until I remembered the girl again, who was so beautiful and fresh with youth” (107). The narrator thus becomes the forsaken man who lies on the ground, and the image of the man whom he had seen only a few days earlier becomes a proleptic vision of himself. Did he actually see a man lying on the ground? The line between what is recounted and what is imagined becomes blurred as the act of observing merges with the interests of imaginary identification.

His unclear thoughts are resolved into clearer focus as he once again conjures the image of the girl and “vividly imagined how charming was her childish, pretty mouth, how pretty her cheeks.” There is a subtle modulation here to a more elaborately narrative counterfactual mode, unfolding in a series of parallel phrases: “how charming was her childish, how I had asked.” So is he remembering or imagining? Once again, it is hard to say. We might at this point begin to wonder whether the girl really exists, or if the remembered scene of their parting is perhaps something we ought to class with the earlier encounter with the “giant” named Tomzcał, who is more likely hallucinated into existence as a projection of his fears. The “how”-governed descriptions of the girl’s lovely features gradually expand into a more dramatic mode, as he imagines “how I had asked her a question a while ago, how in her doubt and disbelief her lovely eyes had looked away, and how she had said no when I asked her if she believed in my sincere love, affection, surrender, and tenderness” (107). He then entertains the possibility that he might “still have had time to convince her that I meant well with her, that her dear person was important to me, that I had many beautiful reasons for wanting to make her happy” (107). But he made no such attempt. These final ruminations are laced with doubts, beliefs, reasons, beautiful reasons – which suggests that what we have just read is a grappling with the demon of skepticism at least as much as it is an expression of regret over a lost opportunity and a path not taken. His imagining of possible reasons then takes a self-reflexive turn, as he focuses his attention on the present and ponders the reason for his own strange behavior:
Why then did I pick the flowers? “Did I pick flowers to lay them upon my sorrow?” I asked myself, and the flowers fell out of my hands. I had risen up, to go home; for it was late now, and everything was dark. (107)

Two things are anatomized here from a disengaged and de-psychologized point of view: the act of picking the flowers, and the fact of his sorrow (allegorized and externalized). We then hear a double-voiced question (one of them enclosed in quotation marks) that the speaker addresses to himself – a therapeutically posed question that has the effect of grounding the speaker through a reflexive acknowledgment and attention to the fact of his own efforts made in response to a changing atmosphere. Inhibiting contemplative fantasy, holding it in check, makes possible a re-uptake of power that translates into an act that is decisive but at the same time non-volitional: The flowers slip out of his hands at the same moment he takes up the reins to begin making his way home. The drama that plays itself out in the final pages of the story involves a contemplation of possibilities placed in tension with (and intensified by) a felt need to justify belief, adduce reasons, resolve doubts. Everything is finally under control: the crisis has been navigated, the threat contained and converted.225 The fact is that it is late, the sky has become dark, and it is therefore time to head back. He suddenly finds that he has gotten up to go.

CODA

I have had much less to say about Walser than I initially hoped. I would happily abandon myself to page after page of close readings, of passages chosen almost at random, unconstrained by the exigencies of an argument or any imagined need to “place” the author or his work. He is an endlessly fascinating writer, a great walking companion; read him and enjoy. What I have offered in the preceding

225 See Henri Michaux’s concept of art as “exorcism” that functions to “ward off the surrounding powers of the hostile world” In his preface to Ordeals and Exorcisms Michaux writes: “But it is hard to start the motor – only near-despair will do the trick.” The “warding off” of “surrounding powers,” or the managing of what might otherwise be an overwhelming experience, comes close to Aby Warburg’s “prophylactic” concept of the function of iconography (which I considered briefly in Chapter One). In The Gay Science, Nietzsche writes that “without art we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself.”
passages is obviously something more (or less) than an unobtrusive open invitation. As this study draws
to a close, I confess to feeling a residual need to justify my extended effort to argue, in such an indirect
manner, for Walser’s significance within a context that might still seem incongruous and perhaps
inappropriate. If Walser is a philosophical writer in the way I have presented him, then I hope it is clear by
now that such a claim makes sense only in the context and limited company of “outsider philosophers” –
distinctly modernist philosophers who emerged at a particular historical moment in the later stages of a
disenchanted culture, philosophers for whom aesthetic and reflective practices represented a way out of
the paralysis of a culture dominated by narrowly conceived philosophical values. These are the
philosophers who helped give birth to modernist literature, by giving literature itself a new sense of its own
relevance and by charging it with the task of restoring a real sense of wonder and possibility to a
disenchanted world. In this newly imagined world, “puzzles become thinkable” in a new way: we are no
longer trapped between the twin philosophical questions of whether the puzzle is in fact solvable or
whether brooding upon the fragmentary pieces can somehow reveal their truth to us.

Put simply, I see Walser as an example of a melancholy modernist who successfully converted
philosophy into a form of modernist experimental art. This is a rather large claim to make about a writer
we like to think of as occupying a permanent place at the periphery, a “clairvoyant of the small.” And in
fact, I still harbor doubts as to whether a genuine need exists for constructing an argument of any kind
around so spontaneous and unclassifiable a writer – a writer, moreover, who most likely could have cared
less about being the occasion for an academic argument. Am I “placing” Walser in what I take to be an
important context, or am I simply evading my discomfort over discussing him in an academic context? On
occasion, I am haunted by the voice of Elias Canetti, who objected to the idea of academicizing Walser
for the purpose of generating an industry of scholarly activity well in advance of the revival of interest in
Walser. “I ask myself,” Canetti wrote in 1973, “whether, among those who build their leisurely, secure,
dead regular academic life on that of a writer who had lived in misery and despair, there is one who is
ashamed of himself.” There are indications here of a backlash against reading Walser as an Outsider
Artist, and at the same time an underlying desire to preserve his status as an outsider, someone who
wrote for himself and for nobody else, an exceptional artist in need of protection from the voyeuristic gaze
of the society from which he had removed himself on principle. All of this testifies to how invested we
have become in the ideal of the authentic Outsider Artist. It is hard to know how to respond critically to
the “vested ideals” that manifest themselves in Canetti’s deeply felt protest. Perhaps all I can do, in the
end, is take comfort in the fact that Walser has been unusually fortunate in the care and quality of the
criticism he has received (and extremely fortunate in his translators). Walser, it turns out, has been
well served by the cottage industry of “Walser Studies.”

My real concern is quite different from Canetti’s. There are many possible claims to make for the
wider dissemination and study of Walser’s work. One of them, I believe, is that Walser helps us to
recognize the difference between experimental art that models a transgressive and oppositional stance
and art that pursues the more therapeutic value of seeking and testing out alternatives. It is here, I think,
that we can begin to appreciate – even argue for – the general validity of Walser’s art. The Walser I
love is an outsider artist who simply had no interest in the transgressive logic of the contemporary avant
garde or its ethos of creative destruction and innovation for its own sake. I have no qualms at all about
drawing attention to this aspect of his work. The values that Walser articulates and models for us, the
work that his writing does, constitute a much-needed alternative to the values that dominate our own
culture today. The active nihilism of the avant-garde, the novelty of transgression that was so rapidly
embraced by general public of the 1920s, has now become the dominant culture. The rallying cry of the
modernist avant garde was “make it new”; the corporate motto of Facebook – “move fast and break
things” – also captures the spirit of our creative-destructive culture. Our current cult of progress, our
myth of the “eternal recurrence of the new,” manifests itself in the omnipresent jargon of process,
innovation, disruption, and (above all) the fetish of the game-changing “big idea,” which must always be

226 I can also point out that acclaimed Walser translator Susan Bernofsky is currently at work on an
extended critical biography of Walser which promises to be an important contribution to Walser
scholarship.
227 Writing of Cezanne’s “schizophrenia” (the pathological “reduction of the world to the totality of frozen
appearances”) Merleau-Ponty claims that the art that results from this illness becomes “valid for
everyone” and thereby “ceases being an absurd fact and destiny to become a general possibility of
human existence” (Merleau-Ponty Reader 71).
228 I wish I could say that the academic profession today stands outside these dominant values. Today,
however, the “dead regular” academic life demands a constant radical rethinking, a repudiation of old
paradigms making way for new ones, an unending process that “encourages new dialogue,” and (above
all) research that demonstrates the need for further research. Of making many books there is no end.
The values that sustain the business of academic inquiry are more often a symptom of the larger culture
than a challenge to it. In “The (Super)Naturalistic) Turn in Contemporary Theory,” Jason Bartulis writes:
“How uncanny to find the language of change, force, and progress surfacing in an intellectual domain
whose defining critical gesture, for better or worse, have involved critiques of those very terms as they
operate in liberal discourse and other Enlightenment ideologies.”
counter-intuitive, always an antidote to *thinking too much* – or even thinking *at all.*" 229 Ironically, many of these buzzword abstractions are recognizably distorted versions of concepts that are central to the thinking of Emerson, Nietzsche, and James. In spite of its language of action and change, the dominant discourse is built around *philosophical* abstractions, and its key terms are a virtual catalog of philosophical themes touched upon in this study. More than a century and a half after Emerson's philosophical meditation on "Experience," we see something like a cult surrounding a reified and glorified concept of *experience.* 230 Paradoxically, the concept of "experience" is the central philosophical abstraction of our culture and our time. I would therefore take issue with an observation made some years ago by the editor of a collection of critical essays on Walser, who writes of Walser’s "style" in connection with the philosophy of William James:

Walser renounces the transitions and 'epic connections' that irritate him in favor of an art that relies on juxtapositions rather than transitions. William James might be describing Walser's writings when he observes in 'The World of Pure Experience' that 'experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges.' If James expanded our conception of experience in philosophy, thereby helping to usher in the modernist breakthrough in English writing, Robert Walser accomplishes something similar in literature. (Harman 11)

At one time, this claim would have seemed entirely plausible to me, or at least innocuous-sounding. I would have been pleased to see Walser's name mentioned alongside James and someone taking note of an important family resemblance. Good enough. But I hope it is clear by now that the connection between James and Walser, and the parallel between philosophy and modernist writing, is far more complicated and in some ways more mutually dependent. James's philosophical concept of experience is not necessarily his major contribution to modernist writing; in fact, like Emerson and Nietzsche, James

229 Malcolm Gladwell is responsible for some of the founding texts of this modern myth (all of them immensely popular and bestselling, spawning many similar titles and establishing the generic outlines of the TED talk): *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000); *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005); and *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008). The titles of these now-classic books have entered into the common vernacular, which is some indication of what can be called, without exaggeration, the global dominance of this new myth of progress.

230 Erik Satie once called experience “a form of paralysis.”
clearly demonstrates the *inadequacy* of experience as a philosophical abstraction.\textsuperscript{231} Throughout this study, I have therefore tried to attend to the ways in which Nietzsche and James avoided such abstraction by exploring intermediate forms of agency, forms of what Benjamin called “the most fully considered intentionality,” which these philosophers recognized as an alternative to philosophical abstractions in our culture that can all too easily function as a substitute for a genuine sense of agency and for the possible values that we might derive from that sense of power.

It is therefore just as important, I think, to distinguish the proto-modernist thought of Nietzsche, James, and Emerson from the distorting frame of our cultural moment as it is to “recover” a writer like Walser through close reading. In a strange way, reading Walser as a test case for their efforts helps me to rescue them from misreadings to which they have been all too susceptible. If I have succeeded at anything, then I hope to have given a context that sharpens our sense of just how difficult it is to “come after Nietzsche.” And, of course, I hope we can more fully appreciate what was achieved by those who were working (and creating) in response to such challenges. I believe artists like Walser have done the best job of rising to the challenge that Nietzsche and James outlined with such clarity and urgency. In the end, perhaps the most radical claim to make for Walser is that he is an inexhaustibly fascinating and stimulating pleasure to read. It is important to recognize what Walser models for us as a viable alternative to other activities in our culture that often betray a fundamental distrust of pleasure and a fear of freedom, which may have something to do with our incapacity to negotiate, or even acknowledge, what Walser called (in “Essay on Freedom”) the “unfreedoms internal to freedom.” These are the limits that produce the concrete situations where we may articulate for ourselves a sense of purposiveness without feeling the need to envision goals or to give reasons. And these are the situations in which we are called upon to test out our total reactions upon life so that they might come to represent new possibilities, new ways of life with perhaps a more general validity. “What wonder,” as James wrote, “that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things.”

But let’s not allow ourselves to get too carried away by these raptures of affirmation and appreciation, lest we fall prey to an undiscriminating optimism and lose all sense of the hard facts the

\textsuperscript{231} See Michel Ter Hark’s “Wittgenstein on the Experience of Meaning and Secondary Use” (in the collection edited by McGinn and Kuusela) on Wittgenstein’s critique of James’s empiricism and specifically his rejection of James’s philosophical concept of “experience.”
concrete situations that we must hold in view with an effort of the imagination. The houses of our imagination must already be occupied, our imagined gardens well-stocked with real toads. And so I feel the need to plant stones in my otherwise unimpeded path, to convert Heidegger’s clearing into a navigable terrain, to embrace a fatalism that would permit to end this study on a more appropriately – and joyously – melancholy note.

For there are definite limits to what I may permit myself to say about literature and philosophy, certain claims regarding their “world-historical” significance that the realities of our world simply will not allow. In certain moods, I like to remind myself of Herman Hesse’s remark (his own claim to back-cover blurb immortality) that if 100,000 people read Walser the world would be a better place. It is certainly beautiful to think so; Hesse’s article of faith even has a prophetic, Nietzschean sound to it. But I have no idea how to raise such a sentiment to the level of a defensible claim. 100,000 readers is not very many readers, at least not from a global standpoint. And if these are an elite and select few, they are not likely to be in positions of power. It is hard to picture the attendees at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos reading Walser between sessions. I’d like to think of Walser as having no place at Davos, and I picture him while out on one of his mountain walks wearing a bemused smile as he passes by the spectacle. But I’m afraid I can also imagine him sweeping the floors and serving drinks – perhaps the only way he would be allowed entry within a closely monitored radius of security. Walser did not stop writing when he entered the asylum at Waldau in 1929; he stopped when he was transferred to Herisau in 1933, the fateful year when he lost all hope of being paid for work he submitted to German-language publications (which had all come under the control and watchful eyes of the Nazi Party). He was responding the way we all do to circumstances beyond our control: first we do what we must, then what we can. And then we play. Or go for walks. Resignation may bear a close resemblance to resolution,

232 In his long story “The Walk,” Walser’s narrator stops on the road to observe houses at a distance and imagines what it is like to live in houses that are already occupied, as opposed to those that are empty and waiting to be occupied. He observes that “it is unfortunately just the most beautiful houses which are occupied, and the person who looks for a dwelling to suit his presumptuous tastes has a difficult time, because that which is empty and available is often frightful and inspires horror.” This is a curious paradox: a present but imagined fact, the imagination formed around and in response to the constraint of something that is taken to be a given, inspires a sense of possibility in a way that idealized absence and distance cannot. He contrasts this imaginative relation to fact with the idealism of a “presumptuous taste” that tries to match a reality to a preconceived ideal.

233 Heidegger’s Lichtung, commonly translated as “the Clearing” but sometimes also rendered as “the lighting.”
but one does not necessarily precede the other in a narrative of loss and recovery. The truly decisive question upon which our recovery depends, as James and Nietzsche remind us, involves the choice between either a fatalistic resolve or a pathos of poses. When asked why he no longer wrote while in the mental institution, with so much time available for work and such long-awaited freedom from worries over meeting his basic needs, Walser is said to have replied: "I am not here to write, but to be mad."


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