ON LOCATION: THE POETICS OF PLACE IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the focus on local, American spaces by five modern poets—Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop. I argue that these poets seek a poetics that can incorporate both the cultural emphasis of Eliot and Pound’s “high modernism” as well as the material emphasis espoused by modernism’s avant-garde and Objectivist poets, such as Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky. The poets of my study seek to disassociate their work from the ideological appeals to tradition made by Eliot and Pound, thus lessening the influence of cultural traditions on contemporary experience. Yet the poets of my study do not envision their work as a-cultural or a-historical. Instead they desire to know the cultural forces that shape their experience in a localized context. The locations that these poets consider are varied: the Brooklyn Bridge in New York; the Passaic Falls in Paterson; the cities of New Haven and Gloucester; or the coast of Nova Scotia and the foreign locales of Brazil. Yet these poets share an interest in local places as poetically generative sites where the immediacy of the present moment converges with the imperatives of culture and history. Thus, this focus on local places allows these poets to forge a poetics more fully responsive to the cultural and material impulses that shaped modern poetry.
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INTRODUCTION

You know, I think, enough of me to understand that I have no belief in the continuity of history. To me the classic lives now just as it did then—or not at all...Everything we know is a local virtue—if we know it at all…

—William Carlos Williams, a letter to Kay Boyle from 1932

It is the poet who lives locally, and whose senses are applied no way else than locally to particulars, who is the agent and the maker of all culture. It is the poet’s job and the poet lives on the job, on location.

—Williams, a letter to Horace Gregory from 1944

The poetics of place in modern American poetry—as practiced by Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and Elizabeth Bishop—constitutes a vital strain of modernism that attempts to combine a broad cultural relevance with a focus on immediate, local conditions of experience. This poetic approach arises in part as a response to the heavily traditional, internationalist poetics made prominent by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound during the formative years of the modern period as a way to reflect their sense of the cultural upheavals and realities of that era. The five poets of this study desire a similar cultural import for their work, but instead seek it by grounding their work in the immediate, physical conditions of local places and landmarks. From this initial focus on the local these poets offer a culturally relevant poetry rooted in the values of their present moment rather than the past. Crane, Williams, Stevens, Olson, and Bishop also share a desire to privilege immediacy and concreteness
in their verse, both in its textual form and its thematic content. It is between these poles of modernist poetics, the conceptual pull of culture and the material pull of concreteness, that the poetics of place comes into practice.

The principles that Williams articulates in the epigraphs above—first, his disbelief in “the continuity of history” and, second, the vital role of “local” “particulars” for the “maker[s]” of “culture”—nicely encapsulate the essential qualities most often associated with modern poetry, particularly during the early years of the twentieth century. Despite the great diversity of work from this period, two impulses can be identified as essentially “modernist”: first, a desire on the part of modernist poets to achieve formal innovations that would reflect the newness of their cultural moment (rather than their historical precedents); and, second, a desire that their work possess a greater immediacy, a more vital connection to one’s experience of contemporary reality. These two impulses are intricately intertwined, and this connection can be seen in the early theorizations of a modernist poetics by one of the period’s most crucial figures, Ezra Pound. Pound’s famous exhortation to “make it new,” as well as his equally famous Imagist “principles”—“Direct treatment of the ‘thing’”; “To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation”; “to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (3)—reflect his desire to break free from what he saw as the derivative, worn-out forms that had dominated poetry through the nineteenth century. Pound believed that directness, economy, and musical rhythm would allow poetry to avoid the sloppiness and imprecision that he attributed to poetry’s residual “Romantic slither.”
Pound’s comments represent the modernists’ desire to move beyond the formal and thematic expectations of the past in order to discover a poetry that would be more reflective of the unique conditions of the modern era. Yet something changes between Pound’s early formulation of a modernist poetics, first published in 1913, and Williams’s insistence on reaffirming these values in the 1930s and 1940s, explicitly against the direction in which Eliot and Pound had guided modern poetry. Williams simple answer to what that “something” was would be Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, which Williams considered a “great catastrophe to our letters,” for it “gave the poem back to the academics” (*A* 146). Eliot’s highly allusive poem, drenched in the fragments of Western culture’s centuries of tradition and famously edited by Pound, solidified a poetic approach that he had been cultivating in the decade preceding *The Waste Land*—an approach heavily reliant on classical and pre-romantic European literary sources as the criteria by which to judge the success of contemporary works. Pound, too, had begun to stray from his early Imagist principles, and by the twenties was well into his work on *The Cantos*, his “poem including history”—a work that could convey the full range of cultural experience that Pound wished to explore, including the economic, political, and cultural precedents that he believed had shaped his contemporary age.

The classical and internationalist approach to literary modernism that Eliot and Pound crafted in the teens and twenties did attempt, in its own way, to be responsive to the experiential realities of the modern era. In the classical and pre-Romantic sources that they favored, Eliot and Pound saw methods for aesthetic production that would allow for a more coherent and concrete response to the many complex elements of their world. Yet Eliot’s and Pound’s reliance on established cultural traditions to validate their
work—whether the classical Greek and Latin traditions, or the traditions of the Italian
Renaissance and Confucius-era China—represents, to the poets of this study, too great a
commitment to what is distant and abstract from the contemporary conditions of the
modern era. Eliot’s and Pound’s emigrations from America to Europe compounded the
problem, as their conceptions of modern poetry as an extension of the Western tradition
failed to afford an appropriate uniqueness to the American modernist situation.

Eliot’s reliance on a traditional framework for revealing the meaning in his
contemporary era appears most explicitly in his famous discussion of James Joyce’s
*Ulysses* and its use of the so-called “mythical method” (*SP* 178). As Eliot puts it, Joyce’s
method of overlaying the story of the Odyssey upon contemporary events “is simply a
way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense
panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (*SP* 177). Eliot’s
conception locates the source of “significance” and “order” squarely in the past, in the
traditional cultural sources available, and decidedly not in the immediate experience of
the present.

Eliot wrote these words in 1923. In the same year Hart Crane expressed both the
undeniable importance of Eliot’s work as well as his desire to move in a different
direction: “There is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my
mind, as Eliot. However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete
reverse of direction. His pessimism is amply justified, in his own case. But I would apply
as much of his erudition and technique as I can absorb and assemble toward a more
positive, or (if [I] must put it so in a sceptical age) ecstatic goal” (*L* 114-5). Crane’s
resolve to use Eliot’s position of authority as “a point of departure” for his own work
illustrates the great influence that Eliot had achieved. Yet for Crane, as well as many of the American poets who were his contemporaries, Eliot’s approach to literary modernism became the version against which to work, with its emphasis on a “consciousness of the past” and the need for the poet to effect “a continual surrender of himself as he is” to the influence and value of literary tradition. As Crane’s comment also reveals, Eliot’s emphasis on a cultural past as the source of value for new poetic works suggests a negation of any inherent value in the conditions of the present moment. To use this starting point of “pessimism” to make a “complete reverse of direction” necessarily implies, then, an affirmation of the value inherent in the conditions of the modern era, and Crane ultimately turns to the local and contemporary landmark of the Brooklyn Bridge to serve as the localized focus of his cultural epic.

Of course, Williams’s evaluation of *The Waste Land* as a “great catastrophe to our letters” also establishes Eliot’s position as the one against which Williams would align his own work. As he recalled later in his *Autobiography*, the ascendance of Eliot’s position caused Williams and the group of writers he associated with around New York at the time—including Marianne Moore, Alfred Kreymborg, Maxwell Bodenheim, and others—to be “looked at askance by scholars and those who turned to scholarship for their norm.” Still, these writers continued to attempt to bring about an “approximation with experience” in their work (*A 148*)—a move away from what Williams saw as the cold academicism and European leanings of Eliot and Pound.3

In fact, despite Pound’s rapid progression beyond the original commitments of Imagism, Williams and his circle continued to espouse Imagist principles in the nineteen-twenties as the cornerstone of a vital modernist poetics. In his *Autobiography* Williams
describes his group’s continued commitments to these principles after the publication of *The Waste Land*: “The immediate image, which was impressionistic, sure enough, fascinated us all. We had followed Pound’s instructions, his famous ‘Don’t,’ eschewing inversions of the phrase, the putting down of what to our senses was tautological and so, uncalled for, merely to fill out a standard form. Literary allusions, save in very attenuated form, were unknown to us” (*A* 148). *The Waste Land* had been published in 1922, and by this time Pound was well into his work on *The Cantos*, leaving behind the principles that continued to inspire Williams and his circle. Yet Williams also was aware of the limitations of Imagism, even though he always recognized the value of its original principles (as he wrote later in *Paterson*, “No ideas but in things”). But, like Pound and Eliot, Williams wanted his work to convey the cultural import of his contemporary era, and by the time of *The Waste Land*’s appearance Williams had begun to conceptualize his project of exploring the uniquely American cultural circumstances of his era, which resulted in the publication in 1925 of *In the American Grain*, a prose study of American history, and the long poem *Paterson* in the forties—a project that Williams claims he was “well along” in conceptualizing by 1927 (*P* xiii).

Thus, during the twenties, both Crane and Williams already sensed that the prevailing conception of modern poetry’s interrelations with cultural history and literary tradition had been shaped by the work of Eliot and Pound, favoring classical, pre-romantic sources from a cultural tradition grounded outside of America. As a response to this situation Crane and Williams each made a decisive turn towards local, American spaces, again as a way to signal their “departure” from the international traditions favored by their more influential contemporaries. For Crane this meant a turn to the Brooklyn
Bridge, a local landmark to Crane (who despite an itinerate adult life was consistently
drawn back to New York) and a symbol to many Americans of the achievements that
were possible in the modern era. Thus, Crane’s answer to Eliot’s and Pound’s turn toward
the past was the praising of a distinctly modern marvel, but one that also had the
metaphorical potential to represent a bridge between the past and what was possible in
the future. For Williams, his constant desire to apply his “senses” “no way else than
locally to particulars” led him to the town of Paterson, New Jersey, after his earlier, more
nomadic explorations of the American landscape in In the American Grain. Like Crane’s
choice of the Brooklyn Bridge, Williams’s choice was most importantly a local,
American site—Paterson is located very near Williams’s hometown of Rutherford.

This attention to local, physical spaces as an essential component of a culturally
relevant poetry (which we will see as well in the relevant works of Stevens, Olson, and
Bishop) reveals the intersection of these poets’ cultural concerns—the possibility of
writing a poetry that meaningfully reflects the world in which they live—with the equally
prevalent modernist desire to achieve greater immediacy and concreteness in the poetic
work. Recent critics have worked to reconstruct the pervasiveness of this materialist
impulse in modern poetry, countering accepted literary-historical accounts of modernism
that had effectively marginalized its importance. Early influences on this materialist
impulse included Pound’s Imagist principles, particularly his desire for “direct treatment
of the ‘thing,’” as well as Gertrude Stein’s avant-garde writings, which emphasized the
sound and shape of words distinct from any reality to which they may refer outside of the
text. This materialist impulse briefly gained prominence with the Objectivist movement,
a loose affiliation that took shape during the late twenties and early thirties and included
writers such as Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, George Oppen, Lorine Neidecker, and Charles Reznikoff, among others. In their introduction to *The Objectivist Nexus*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain identify “Objectivist” poetics as “a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview,” which “calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3). DuPlessis and Quartermain also identify “a clear ancestry” of this movement in Pound, Stein, and Williams (14). The choice by DuPlessis and Quartermain to call this movement “the Objectivist nexus,” rather than “school” or “movement,” reflects the permeable boundaries associated with “Objectivist” poetry, which at times included Stevens and Marianne Moore as crucial figures as well (2).

This emphasis on “the materiality of both the world and the word” in modernist poetics intersects in significant ways with the desire to write a culturally relevant poetry—particularly a culturally relevant poetry that is not heavily reliant on established traditions to validate one’s sense of the present. In essence, the impulse toward materiality—to achieve “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” or to find “no ideas but in things”—negates the appeal of culturally distant, abstract notions of tradition. To impose a traditional framework on a poem that seeks to capture the essence of contemporary, American experience—whether that framework originates from Elizabethan England, the Italian Renaissance, or Confucian China—necessarily abstracts that poetic work from the immediate, concrete conditions of that experience. The impulse toward materiality compliments and bolsters the necessity of adhering closely to things “as they are” in a culturally relevant poetics.
Of course, the notion of culture is an abstract concept, and one possessing an exceedingly slippery and contested nature, particularly during the modern era. Yet it is a concept deeply influenced by the material conditions of the particular location for which it is used, whether that location be transnational (Western culture), national (American culture), or more localized (Midwestern culture, the culture of New York City, etc.). This intersection of material and cultural concerns is constitutive of the ways in which the poets of this study conceive of place, for in these local places they find conditions that are both collective and concrete, cultural and material. A specific place, whether the Brooklyn Bridge, the Passaic Falls in Paterson, the cities of New Haven and Gloucester, or the distant locales of Petrópolis and Ouro Prêto, Brazil, can be experienced by many, and that experience is also shaped by the lives of many. It is through such interactions, occurring “on location,” that conceptions of history and culture come into being and become associated with specific places and events. The places that these poets explore in their work are also the sites where abstract notions like history and culture enter into a complex process of contributing to, and being shaped by, the contemporary ways of life of those who inhabit that space. By engaging with this process, these five poets strive to create poetry that is locally responsive, culturally relevant, and rooted in the immediate, material conditions of experience.

But this association that I describe is not one often acknowledged by these poets, and they were certainly not affiliated in any coherent movement or school of poetry. Instead, it is their similar poetic responses to the prevailing conception of modernism, as well as their attempts to reconcile the cultural and material impulses in their work, that constitutes what I am describing as their modernist poetics of place. For Crane and
Williams, their formative encounters with the burgeoning influence of Eliot’s and Pound’s version of modernism took place during the teens and twenties, although Williams’s struggle against this version of modernism continued into the forties with the publication of *Paterson*. As the critical currents of modernism moved into the middle years of the twentieth century, Eliot and Pound’s modernism contributed to the growing hegemony of the New Criticism in the thirties and forties—a development primarily fueled by the critical and aesthetic stances of Eliot. These ideas that contributed to the development of the New Criticism began to push Pound out of the movement’s purview; Pound’s increasingly aggressive political stances and increasingly obscure poetry also helped to alienate him from the mainstream literary consciousness. This developing critical climate is the context in which Stevens produced his later poetry, which is my concern for this project, as well as the context in which Olson and Bishop began their poetic careers.

Eliot’s argument for an impersonal poetic voice and a submission to tradition became elements essential to the development of the New Criticism. This deference toward the established literary tradition resonated with some of the conservatively minded figures of the early New Criticism—particularly writers such as John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, key figures in the Southern Agrarian movement that produced *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* in 1930. These writers identified the shortcomings of the modern cultural moment in the American south and sought a return to traditional, agrarian values to alleviate this condition. In addition to his cultural traditionalism, Eliot’s penchant for objective and scientific language in his criticism (which contrasts strongly with the
dogmatic passion of Pound) helped to shape the growing critical interest in the poem as an autonomous aesthetic object, or a “verbal icon,” essentially stripped of any extra-textual significance. The poems favored by this developing critical approach were not entirely devoid of cultural import—poems like *The Waste Land* or Allen Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” obviously contain an essential cultural element. But the developing ethos of the New Criticism sought to make such elements secondary to the internal coherence and formal complexities of the work itself. It bears mentioning that recent critical perspectives have revealed the latent cultural agendas at work in the New Critical project and the works it endorsed. But in terms of the critical climate that the ascendancy of the New Criticism created, and in which Williams, Stevens, Olson, and Bishop worked, the focus on internally coherent, intricately developed, and “metaphysical” poems went a long way in shaping the prevailing poetic sentiments in America.

An illustrative moment in this developing critical hegemony occurred at a poetry conference at Bard College in 1948, attended by Williams, Louise Bogan, Richard Wilbur, Kenneth Rexroth, and Bishop, among others. James E. B. Breslin discusses this gathering to show the pervasive influence of the New Criticism and its rapid ascendance among younger American poets writing in the wake of Eliot. Breslin describes the New Critically informed position espoused by Wilbur, one of the younger poets at Bard College. The most strenuous challenge to his conservative, formalist position came from Williams, the oldest poet in the group. Bogan, a poet who chronologically belongs to the generation between Williams’s and Wilbur’s, gave a paper advocating an academic, Eliotic position, which Bishop believed to be given to refute Williams. In a letter
describing Bogan’s paper Bishop discusses its “dull and academic” tone and suggests that “that sort of thing should be left to someone like Eliot, who really knows what he’s doing” (OA 174). Not only does this event reveal the rapid entrenchment of the New Critical position, but Bishop’s comments also reveal the sense that Eliot’s writings have been most influential in cementing this critical perspective. It is also interesting to note that Olson and Bishop were born in 1910 and 1911, respectively, at almost an exact midpoint between Bogan and Wilbur, the two poets most committed to promoting the New Criticism’s position at the Bard conference.

The essential ideas of the New Criticism that began to take root during the thirties and forties profoundly influenced the practice and study of literature through the fifties and beyond. Poetry had become valued for its potential to be studied on its own merits, on the level of complexity that could be contained within a coherent textual whole. The ability of the poetic work to reflect its cultural moment became relegated to this emphasis on complexity within coherence. This era of the New Criticism is not identical with the early period of modernism so greatly informed by Eliot’s and Pound’s works in the teens and twenties, but many of the essential qualities remain. To a poet like Williams, who found himself at odds with the early modernist conception of poetry’s cultural function, the changes occasioned by the rise of the New Criticism were essentially a repetition of the same problems. Thus, we see Williams’s attitude at the Bard College poetry conference in 1948, and the following comments from a letter written in 1944: “I have maintained from the first that Eliot and Pound by virtue of their hypersensitivity (which is their greatness) were too quick to find a culture (the English continental) ready made for
their assertions. They ran from something else, something cruder but, at the same time, newer, more dangerous but heavy with rewards for the sensibility that could reap them” (SL 227).10

Stevens was, in fact, older than Williams and Crane, as well as Pound and Eliot. But in the first decades of the twentieth century, Stevens largely stayed out of the contentions that swirled around modernism’s formative years, despite his familiarity with many of the avant-garde writers and artists of New York. Stevens was more actively engaged in reconciling his artistic ambitions with his desire for economic security, which resulted in a prosperous career as an insurance executive.11 My interest in Stevens lies with his later work during the forties and fifties, a period in which Stevens produced some of his most well regarded works, many of which also cemented his reputation as a supreme poet of the imagination committed to the creative potential of the isolated poetic subjectivity. Yet it is during this period that Stevens also produced many critical essays in which he responds to his own reputation as a poet of the imagination by attempting to articulate a greater role for the realities of the world in his poetry. In many ways the whole of Stevens’s poetic work rehearses a constant oscillation between the privileging of the imagination or reality, but at this later point in his career Stevens makes a more concerted effort to invest the work that he does with a degree of cultural import. Stevens advocates for this greater awareness of the role concrete, material conditions play in poetry in his long poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” In this poem Stevens explores the ramifications that such an emphasis on material reality, as suggested by the city of New Haven, would have for his choices in poetic language.
For Olson the New Critical hegemony was a reality from the beginning of his career. He began writing poetry in the nineteen-forties, and his work was at odds with the New Criticism from the start. Olson seeks for his poetry an alternative, spatially conceived cultural poetics, but he does so by invoking the precedents of Williams and Pound: two poets whose work also lies outside of the scope of the New Criticism. But in Pound Olson finds a poet instrumental in shaping the modernist poetic mode, and in Williams he finds a poet constantly interrogating the validity of both the initial precepts of modernism and the rise of the New Criticism. Olson envisions his work as taking what lessons can be gained from Pound and Williams and correcting the errors that their cultural poetics reveal. The result is Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, centered in the town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and attempting to convey a spatially conceived experience of the town’s culture. With this approach Olson seeks a poetics that can be responsive to the diverse factors that constitute the cultural reality of a particular place. He also posits a formal strategy—“Projective Verse”—that can open the constraints of the formally closed, internally coherent New Critical poem.

Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry widens the scope of American spaces under consideration—from North American (Nova Scotia and New England, where Bishop spent most of her childhood) to South American locales (Petropolis and Ouro Preto, Brazil, where Bishop spent nearly two decades of her life). Bishop’s engagement with issues of culture arises in her explorations of marginalized spaces and voices in the locations with which she is familiar. Recent critics argue that Bishop’s work constitutes what Adrienne Rich calls a poetry of “outsiderhood,” subversively challenging traditional relationships of power and stemming from her marginalized status as both a female and
lesbian poet. But Bishop’s work reveals a more complicated picture, as her work constantly interrogates the process by which one comes to know, and to feel a connection with, a particular place. The terms of this process for Bishop are always contingent upon the specific, localized details of the particular topic or setting under investigation, and thus her work resists any all-encompassing evaluation of its strategies. Bishop’s poems investigate the interrelations among people, places, and cultures, as well as the role played by the poet in exploring these interrelations. Bishop’s work at times attempts to identify and sympathize with those marginalized by the cultural process that legitimates a particular relationship between people and places. Yet at times Bishop’s work is also uncritical of her privileged position within this dynamic, which qualifies any assessment of her work as primarily concerned with “outsiderhood.”

For Crane, Williams, Stevens, Olson, and Bishop, despite their important differences, the focus on local places allows these poets to posit a more intimate connection between their position as poet and the cultural reality that each poet seeks to convey in her/his work. In the modernism of Eliot and Pound, the representation of contemporary cultural conditions was secondary to an awareness of how these conditions could be incorporated into a consciousness of the traditions that inform the contemporary moment. And in the New Criticism, the representation of contemporary culture was secondary to the formal complexity and internal coherence that the poem was expected to possess. The five poets of this study attempt to prioritize the contemporary cultural conditions in which they are writing by focusing on local places that embody the nexus of political, aesthetic, and historical ideas that form the experience of a locality as a culturally vital space. The focus on local places by these poets is not an a-historical
move; instead it offers a different conception of how past traditions inform the present moment, placing an emphasis on what is immediate and concrete in the present, regardless of how these conditions may or may not be made to fit into the structural patterns of past traditions.\(^\text{13}\)

The work of each of these poets demonstrates a development from more formal, textual concerns toward an effort to reflect broader cultural ideas and issues. Of course, these two concerns are often intertwined, but such a development exists, whether it is manifest in Crane’s progression from shorter, self-contained lyrics to the epic scope of *The Bridge*; or Williams’s and Olson’s moves from formally innovative works toward grand cultural epics; or Stevens’s desire late in his career to assert the importance of material conditions to his search for a supreme fiction; or Bishop’s growing interest in interrogating cultural status and cultural margins in her intricately crafted poetry. Yet this desire for greater cultural awareness in the poetry develops as a complement to the initial concern with the material aspects of the poetic text. And it is in the poems concerning local, American places that these poets’ cultural and material interests most fruitfully intersect, as questions of community and history become inextricably linked with questions of immediacy and concreteness in the experience of the places that shaped these poets’ lives.

\(^{1}\) This working definition of modernist poetry is also important for the poets that it excludes: early or pre-modernist poets like Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Edwin Arlington Robinson, or Edgar Lee Masters do not show the same conscious break with the poetry of the nineteenth century that is consistent among the modernists that I will be discussing. For example, Frost’s disdain for the free verse innovations of the modernists and his commitment to traditional formal conventions suggest a transitional role for Frost among
the modernists. Also, Frost’s poetry reveals an intense desire to interrogate the
assumptions of a spiritual underpinning to the natural world (a frequent romantic and
Victorian concern), and his work consistently uses irony to show the inscrutability of
such spiritual possibilities. But it is not his answers to these questions that determine his
relationship to modernism but rather his preoccupation with these questions. Sandburg’s
indebtedness to Whitman, as well as Robinson’s, Master’s, and Robinson Jeffers’
frequent work in the long narrative form most reminiscent of Victorian precursors,
position these poets as pre-modernist figures in the context of modernism and thus
excludes them from this study, despite their interests in local, American spaces.

Jeffers in particular deserves further comment, especially given his concern with
the local conditions of the California coast that he called home. It is Jeffers’
professed antipathy to modern poetry, as well as his unwillingness to engage in the debates
surrounding modernism, that ultimately lead to his exclusion from this study, and which
lead Albert Gelpi to label Jeffers as “programmatically anti-Modernist” (424). Jeffers’
few prose comments support this conclusion, such as in his preface to the collection,
Tamar, written in 1923: “…a second-rate mind is sure to confuse eccentricity with
originality; its one way of saying something new is to deform what it has to say; like the
bobbed fox it sets the fashion for third-rate minds; and these are inevitably imitative, only
now they follow a bad model instead of a good one. Here, I believe, is the origin of those
extraordinary affectations which distinguish so much of what is called modern poetry”
(708). Jeffers makes similar efforts to distance himself from the modernist context in an
introduction from 1935: “It seemed to me that Mallarmé and his followers, renouncing
intelligibility in order to concentrate the music of poetry, had turned off the road into a
narrowing lane. Their successors could only make further renunciations; ideas had gone,
now meter had gone, imagery would have to go; then recognizable emotions would have
to go; perhaps at last even words might have to go or give up their meaning, nothing be
left but musical syllables. Every advance required the elimination of some aspect of
reality, and what could it profit me to know the direction of modern poetry if I did not
like the direction?” (711-2).

For further discussion of Eliot’s efforts to align his work with traditional precedents and
the complex motives behind this strategy, see Chapter One of Langdon Hammer’s Hart
Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism.

Williams’s relationship with Pound highlights the complications and potential
contradictions that existed among these early modernists and their allegiances. Williams
and the other writers with whom he associated were initially attracted to Pound’s Imagist
movement, and Williams and Pound did maintain an at times contentious friendship
throughout their lives. Yet Williams continually criticized Pound’s later work in The
Cantos; for example, he made the following comment in the same letter to Kay Boyle
from which the first epigraph for this chapter is taken: “Ezra Pound is too ‘like’ the
classics. He is a classicist, almost a pedant, according to some. His actuality is what has
been forced on him by his disposition and the mode of life he affects. He writes in
American as far as he writes in any language, but his meter is the purification of older
orders used with modern words. He has brought back the modern language to the water of excellent poetic usage, the what the hell? He is teaching it classic dancing” (SL 131-2).

4 “The poetics of indeterminacy” in modernism, as discussed by Marjorie Perloff, bears important similarities to this materialist impulse, and she includes Stein, Pound, and Williams as major figures in her study.

5 In his work Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word, Michael Davidson also argues for the significance of materialist concerns in modern poetry, positing “an Objectivist continuum running through modernism” that “stresses exactitude and sincerity, visual immediacy over introspection and irony” (23). Davidson explores “the relationship between two forms of materiality, social and aesthetic,” and how “the interdependence of these two realms can be seen in modernist poets’ self-conscious use of the material text” (4, 226). For other investigations of the link between modernism and materiality, see Douglas Mao’s Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production, and Daniel Newton Tiffany’s Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric.

6 The conflation here of “word and world,” or of the text and that to which it refers, seems potentially problematic, but it can be seen in the writings of a poet like Williams, who has famously stated that the poem is a “machine made out of words” and that the poem must find “no ideas but in things”: here the question of from where the more authentic materiality arises suggests both the text and the world outside of it. This emphasis on materiality in Williams’s work did draw criticism from Stevens, who was concerned that the form of the poem may be privileged over what it has to say: “[…] Williams is an old friend of mine. I have not read Paterson. I have the greatest respect for him, although there is the constant difficulty that he is more interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say. The fact remains that we are always fundamentally interested in what a writer has to say. When we are sure of that, we pay attention to the way in which he says it, not often before” (L 544).

7 See James Manganaro’s Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept and Susan Hegeman’s Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture.

8 Manganaro’s Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept discusses the development of this notion of culture as related to a particular geographic boundary during the modern period.

9 Several works identify the processes of this development from modernism to the New Criticism and their latent motives. See, for example, Hammer, Huysyn, McDonald, and Menand.

10 Williams’s development from early advocate for a modernism focused on the local to vocal opponent of the New Criticism is discussed in detail in John Lowney’s The American Avant-Garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory. Lowney identifies these periods as, first, Williams’s “poetics of descent”—trying to move away from elevated notions of modernism to return
to the local—and, second, Williams’s “poetics of dissent,” when he becomes a prominent literary figure working against the New Critical hegemony.

11 For further discussion of the influence of economic concerns on Stevens’s career, see Lentricchia.

12 An investigation of American spaces arises in the work of other poets from the middle part of the century, but unlike Olson and Bishop, these considerations of place relegate its cultural component to an exploration of the psychological depths that an interest in place can achieve. For example, Robert Lowell’s extended prose work in *Life Studies*, “91 Revere Street,” explores the psychological effects of Lowell’s childhood on his adult life; Theodore Roethke’s *North American Sequence* explores the importance of place to the poet’s psychological sense of being rather than his sense of the cultural reality of his era; and the work of the Deep Image poets, such as Robert Bly and James Wright, use place in a similar fashion, as their interest is in the psychological depths to which images of local landmarks and landscapes can transport the poet.

13 Roberto M. Dainotto’s recent work *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* argues that the recent critical focus on place and region has not been critically rigorous enough to avoid falling into “a negation of history.” Instead, he argues “To claim that culture springs from a place means, after all, to naturalize a process of historical formation, and along with history to negate the historical forces, struggles, and tensions that made a culture what it is” (2). In the case of my study, the works of these poets already show a complex notion of the way in which cultural and historical traditions inform the current moment in the work. The complex understanding of this process revealed in the work of these poets resists any such “negation of history” or “naturalizing” of the “process of historical formation.”
CHAPTER 1

“BEYOND THE PRINT THAT BOUND HER NAME”: HART CRANE’S THE BRIDGE AND THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

1.

At a relatively young age, and with little formal education, Hart Crane produced some of modern poetry’s most accomplished, highly-wrought lyrical poems—even Crane’s early detractors were typically willing to acknowledge his strength of voice and formal dexterity in these shorter lyrics. For example, Yvor Winters, one of the typical early critics who found Crane’s larger ambitions in The Bridge fatally flawed, was willing to acknowledge that Crane’s formal skills revealed “a poet of great genius” (139). Similarly, when discussing the lyric “The Wine Menagerie” from Crane’s first book of poems, R. P. Blackmur praises the fact that “there is nothing for the words to take the place of; they are their own life, and have an organic continuity, not with the poet’s mind nor with the experience they represent, but with themselves” (25). Crane reveals this inclination toward a highly formalized, autotelic poetry in his essay “General Aims and Theories”: “It is my hope to go through the combined materials of the poem, using our ‘real’ world somewhat as a spring-board, and to give the poem as a whole an orbit or predetermined direction of its own.” When, however, Crane sought to write a
poem of epic scope with *The Bridge*, this lyrical mastery was not enough, and the “real world” could not be used merely as a “spring-board” to vault the poet into a purely aesthetic realm. Instead, Crane’s idiosyncratic, self-referential poetic mode was forced to turn outside of itself and more fully incorporate the diverse cultural and historical materials necessary for creating, in his own terms, “an epic of the modern consciousness” (*CP* 252).

This challenge of turning outward, of engaging literary, historical, and cultural figures and places in *The Bridge* to forge Crane’s unique vision of America, essentially placed Crane’s poetic project at odds with the poetic idiom he had attempted to master. This tension provided the basis for many critical dismissals of *The Bridge*: Blackmur, for example, despite his praise for Crane’s shorter lyrics, believed that *The Bridge* suffered from an incompatibility in Crane’s use of “the private lyric to write the cultural epic” (21). When writing these shorter, “private” lyrics, Crane was able to cultivate a poetic defined by its enclosed, textual immediacy, which rendered the question of representation—of what the words of the poem were meant to signify extra-textually—tangential to the poem’s overall function. With his desire to forge a more collective vision that would entail a “cultural epic,” however, Crane was forced to bring the question of representation back to prominence in his poetry, for to achieve the cultural relevance Crane sought for *The Bridge*, his poetry would have to reflect the reality of the world around him—essentially, the poem would have to reflect the immediate conditions and ways of life that constitute Crane’s version of America’s
“modern consciousness.” Yet Crane’s privileging of the immediacy of the poetic text persists in The Bridge, which both adds to and complicates Crane’s desire to capture his cultural moment.

Crane described his cultural project in The Bridge as “a new cultural synthesis of values in terms of our America” (L 223). This use of the term “our America” suggests Crane’s desire for his work to be reflective of a particular version of American culture; it also suggests a sense of exclusion from other attempts to convey a similar idea. In his letters, Crane consistently identifies Eliot’s work as the conception of modern culture against which he sees himself working. As I discussed in the Introduction, Crane wishes to take Eliot’s “pessimism” as “a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction,” seeking his own “more positive” or “ecstatic goal” in contrast to Eliot’s sense of cultural identity (L 114-5). At times, though, Crane’s critical essays reveal an unmistakable influence from Eliot’s criticism. This influence appears most obviously in “General Aims and Theories,” in which Crane describes his goal for the poem “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” as attempting to achieve “a reconstruction in these modern terms of the basic emotional attitude toward beauty that the Greeks had” (CP 217). Crane believed this approach would help to ameliorate the uncertainties brought on by the “many divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today” (CP 217). Here Crane closely echoes Eliot’s description in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” of “the mythical method,” which Eliot sees as a way of giving order to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). As a frequent reader of
Eliot’s work, and a great admirer of *Ulysses*, Crane was surely aware of Eliot’s conception of finding a pre-existing order in ancient myths that could provide meaning to the present era.

Yet Crane’s constant desire to make a “complete reverse of direction” from Eliot remained, and the changes in approach from “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” to *The Bridge* constitute an important progression, if not a complete reversal, from Eliot’s method. Like Eliot’s “mythical method,” Crane’s description of his process in “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” locates the source of cultural value in the past rather than in the present. The present moment in both poets’ descriptions is decidedly lacking in meaning or order, appearing as “seething” and “confused,” or an “immense panorama of futility and anarchy.” Crane’s desire to create a “cultural synthesis of values” in *The Bridge* “in terms of our America” places a greater emphasis on the present moment and the manner in which it is experienced by Crane and those whom he identifies as part of his collective “our.” Thus, Crane shifts his focus from the traditional literary sources of “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” to a local and contemporary landmark, the Brooklyn Bridge.

This choice to employ the Brooklyn Bridge as the controlling image of *The Bridge* places at the fore a physical, local presence to Crane, and also a recent historical incarnation, whose contemporaneity reflects the cultural present he seeks to convey in his epic. This dual function for the bridge (it is local and contemporary) is crucial to Crane’s project: the bridge as local, material presence conveys an immediacy analogous to that of Crane’s shorter lyrics, even as the representational role in *The Bridge* becomes more prominent; and the bridge as a contemporary incarnation of America’s cultural ambitions
to transcend the limits of the past shifts the organizing principle from “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” to *The Bridge* from the traditional to the local, from what Crane knows as a traditionally validated cultural source (Faustus and Helen) to what he knows to be culturally meaningful from his own, local experience (the Brooklyn Bridge). Thus, Crane’s choice of the Brooklyn Bridge as his poem’s controlling image represents an attempt to encompass both characteristics—immediacy and cultural relevance—as part of Crane’s sense of the “modern consciousness” that his poem is intended to convey.

II.

Details of Crane’s life reveal his important relationship to the Brooklyn Bridge, as he found himself continually drawn to its presence. Crane’s adult life was characterized by wandering; he lived in Ohio, New York City, upstate New York, Cuba, and Mexico, and paid extended visits to other locations. Yet he found himself continually returning to New York City—often driven by economic necessity and the search for work, but also by a desire for the city’s cultural milieu. For portions of his residence in New York, Crane stayed in Brooklyn Heights, within sight of the Brooklyn Bridge. For a time he even lived at 110 Columbia Heights, the same building from which John Roebling, the bridge’s chief engineer, supervised its construction after he became too ill to travel to the construction site. In a 1924 letter Crane wrote to Waldo Frank, “Note the above address, and you will see that I am living in the shadow of that bridge” (L 181).

Even when other obligations took him away from New York, Crane kept the bridge prominently in mind as he continued to work on his epic poem. After Crane experienced a period of significant progress on *The Bridge* while living in Cuba, the role
of the actual bridge to Crane’s project remained significant. He described the situation to his mother: “In the last ten days I’ve written over ten pages of The Bridge—highly concentrated stuff, as you know it is with me—and more than I ever crammed into that period of time before. I can foresee that everything will be brightly finished by next May when I come north, and I can make a magnificent bow to that magnificent structure, The Brooklyn Bridge, when I steam (almost under it) into dock! For the poem will be magnificent” (L 269-70). These examples are anecdotal, but they suggest that even as the bridge assumed an abstract and symbolic significance in the poem, Crane’s experience of it as a local and accessible reality remained an essential part of its appeal.

The use of the Brooklyn Bridge as the poem’s central image also suggests a more direct transaction between the poem as text and the external reality that it is intended to reflect. Crane establishes the bridge as the metaphorical crux of the poem, for he describes his project as building “toward the climax of the bridge, symbol of our constructive future, our unique identity” (L 124). The bridge may suggest several connotations beyond its architectural function—a symbol of unlimited human potential, or of the power of humanity to triumph over nature, etc.—and the poem that it inspires moves far afield of the bridge’s local environs. Nonetheless, Crane’s scheme for the poem deliberately locates the originating source of cultural meaning in a physical, local site that can be experienced directly, which suggests a greater immediacy and accessibility in Crane’s scheme for those who may share his sense of American culture. Crane’s collective sense of this culture—“our America,” “our constructive future, our unique identity”—implies both a sense of difference and a sense of community: difference from some other version of cultural “identity” (such as Eliot’s) and a collective
desire to quantify and express this alternate cultural vision. Crane’s use of the Brooklyn Bridge as image suggests this sense of difference, as the use of a local and contemporary American site contrasts with the European classicism of Eliot and his colleagues, such as Pound and Joyce. This image also can anchor the poem’s meaning in the immediacy of the physical, local conditions that constitute an American cultural experience.

The “Proem” entitled “To Brooklyn Bridge” that begins Crane’s epic establishes the essential qualities that Crane values in the Brooklyn Bridge—its vital, material presence as well as its potential as a cultural symbol. Crane offers an initial image of his fellow New Yorkers distracted from the immediacy of the world around them: “I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights / With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again, / Foretold to other eyes on the same screen” (CP 45). Those sitting in these “cinemas” appear to be mesmerized and deceived by the representational function of this medium, as the “panoramic sleights” fail to “disclose” their true subject, and the viewers seem taken in by the repetitiveness of these images. Crane responds to this scenario by appealing to the bridge itself, standing “across the harbor, silver-paced / As though the sun took step of thee, yet left / Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,— / Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!” (CP 45). The stability of the bridge, with its “implicit” power to “stay,” contrasts with the “never disclosed” “sleights” offered to those sitting in the cinemas. But Crane also identifies a value in the bridge beyond its physical presence, for it possesses “some motion ever unspent,” suggesting the bridge’s potential to exceed its local, physical presence. This dual sense of stasis and motion, of rootedness and expansiveness, foreshadows the function of the bridge throughout the poem. For the Brooklyn Bridge not only roots the poem in the
immediacy of Crane’s contemporary experience, but it also becomes a symbolic bridge as the poem considers the other crucial ideas and locations that inform Crane’s version of his contemporary cultural moment. As the poem investigates these other elements of culture, Crane attempts to maintain a connection between these elements and the immediacy of the contemporary moment, and again the physical presence of the Brooklyn Bridge reinforces this contemporaneity and immediacy. Before the “Proem” ends, Crane again stresses his personal and local attraction to the bridge, even if at times it is shrouded in darkness: “Under thy shadow by the piers I waited; / Only in darkness is thy shadow clear” (CP 46).

My emphasis on the physical and local qualities of the Brooklyn Bridge to Crane’s epic may initially seem contradicted by the poem’s apparent progress toward the transcendent vision of its final section, “Atlantis.” After all, Crane does describe his project in The Bridge as “a mystical synthesis,” suggesting a desire to move beyond the initial, material elements of history and culture toward the transcendence of myth. But Crane’s composition process with The Bridge, which reveals a disparity between the order in which the poem was composed and its eventual order of publication, qualifies the notion that the Brooklyn Bridge serves a predominately symbolic function, seeking to push the poem beyond its material reality. Crane began his poem by writing “Atlantis,” in which he most clearly annunciates a mystical synthesis of the diverse materials of history and culture, concentrated in the “steeled Cognizance” (CP 116) of the bridge as symbol. Yet, even with the rest of the poem unwritten, Crane determined to place “Atlantis” at the end of his epic as the culmination of the poetic journey toward which the rest of the poem would build. The difficulty of building toward this endpoint in a justifiable way, or in a
way that would accommodate Crane’s desire for an “organic” development in his work, was one of the major struggles that extended the composition process for the poem. As Crane approached the completion of the poem, he grew concerned that he had failed in achieving an acceptable unity and coherence in its sequence. He responded by adding three sections—“Cape Hatteras,” “Indiana,” and “Quaker Hill”—shortly before publication of *The Bridge*, hoping that these additional sections could add a greater sense of coherence to the relationship in the poem between its transcendent vision and the local, physical world.

This composition history qualifies critical appraisals of *The Bridge* that minimize the relevance of the physical world, including the Brooklyn Bridge, to the poem as a whole. John T. Irwin’s reading of *The Bridge* exemplifies this tendency, as he argues that the poem “is a journey that leads from the real world of physical objects to an imaginary place or object that symbolizes the poem itself” (298). Irwin compares the first and last sections of *The Bridge*—“Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge” and “Atlantis”—arguing that, in the “Proem,” “one has at least a partial sense that a real object in the external world (the Brooklyn Bridge) is being described.” In “Atlantis,” on the other hand, Irwin asserts “one senses that what is being described is a wholly imaginary object, a symbolic bridge” (296-7). Alan Trachtenberg makes a similar argument, contending that by the end of the poem the bridge “does not wait to be found, but to be created. That is, it represents not an external ‘thing,’ but an internal process, an act of consciousness. The bridge is not ‘found’ in ‘Atlantis,’ the final section of the poem, but ‘made’ throughout the poem” (146). This desire to read *The Bridge* as divorced from the physical world has an obvious
precursor in Blackmur’s early criticism of Crane, and it informs the later post-
structuralist readers of Crane who focus exclusively on the textual intricacies of his
poetry.\textsuperscript{4}

Such readings correspond to the way in which Crane initially envisioned the
poem, with the apotheosis of “Atlantis” serving as an unproblematic culmination of a
balanced, progressive movement through the poem’s cultural and historical materials. In
fact, this scheme is basically the one Crane described in “General Aims and Theories,”
with his desire “to go through the combined materials of the poem, using our ‘real’ world
somewhat as a spring-board…” But the manner in which Crane actually composed the
poem, starting with the transcendence of “Atlantis” and then essentially working
backwards, complicates the notion of a clear movement away from material reality and
toward “a symbolic bridge.” Instead, we see Crane beginning with the transcendent
vision of “Atlantis” and then attempting to connect this insight to the historical and
cultural realities of his world, only to find such a connection more and more difficult to
achieve. But Crane maintains his commitment to the immediacy of the physical world,
not only with the controlling image of the Brooklyn Bridge, but also with the poem’s
extended meditation on the physical body of the American landscape, “the flesh our feet
have moved upon” (\textit{CP} 57). From this perspective, the material conditions of experience
are not something that the poem can easily dismiss in favor of a visionary subjectivity.
Instead, the material world must remain an integral part of Crane’s efforts to construct a
vital and accessible version of American culture as “our constructive future, our unique
identity.”
III.

Crane’s consistent attraction to the immediacy of the material world does not, however, lead him to seek a direct correspondence, or an unmediated representation, between his text and the physical features of America that he explores. Crane finds himself more than a half-century removed from any romantic or transcendentalist context that may have entertained the possibility of such a mystical or divinely inspired correspondence; Crane’s own romantic tendencies, demonstrated in his shorter lyrics, seek an aesthetic rather than divine absolute, an approach that more often highlights formal artifice rather than effacing it. In addition, such direct correspondence or union between word and object is an impossibility for language, a system that engenders an inherent gap between signifier and signified. Because of the acute linguistic awareness that Crane demonstrates with his highly formalized shorter lyrics, he would surely be conscious of the limitations of his poetic language in this new undertaking, as well as of the obvious advantages allowed by these linguistic realities. Specifically, the inevitable gaps that will arise between word and concept—between the text Crane creates and the cultural reality that this text is meant to convey—allow a space in which Crane as poet may maneuver, a space for manipulating the relationship between the people, places, and images of Crane’s vision and what they have traditionally represented. Because of this gap, Crane is able to take figures such as Columbus, Pocahontas, and Whitman, and refigure their relationships to his contemporary culture, adapting them to fit his version of American culture in the early twentieth century. Any notion of direct correspondence
between the poetic text and its extra-textual reality would cast Crane as a passive medium reporting the relevant cultural data rather than as the active poetic voice constructing this “cultural epic.”

Thus, we can recast the initial tension of Crane’s project—between immediacy and cultural relevance—in terms that highlight the text’s representational function. On one hand, by employing the Brooklyn Bridge as the poem’s central image, Crane seeks to ground his poem in the local, material world, giving the poem an immediacy analogous to that of his experience of the Brooklyn Bridge. On the other hand, Crane sees within the inevitable gaps caused by the poem’s representational function the potential space in which he can manipulate and refigure the diverse materials that will be used to fashion the poem’s cultural vision. Each of these imperatives raises a particular challenge to Crane’s project: by attempting to ground his work in a local place and thus limiting the instability of representation, Crane faces the prospect of becoming a passive poetic voice, transmitting the relevant cultural materials rather than actively participating in the construction of his cultural vision. By embracing the inevitable gaps in representation and opening up a more liberating space in which to forge his cultural vision, Crane risks distancing himself from the sources and materials that must constitute that vision and which will assure its cultural relevance. Although Crane’s use of the Brooklyn Bridge suggests an emphasis on local experience rather than traditional authority, his desire for cultural relevance in his work requires some connection to traditional conceptions of American culture, even if his primary goal is to refigure these conceptions. His work
must still possess a degree of accessibility in terms of its cultural content to avoid becoming too much of a self-contained, subjective exercise, like the poetry of his earlier, shorter lyrics.

The challenge for Crane becomes, then, a negotiation between an overly passive or an overly active conception of his poetic role—a challenge discussed by Emerson in his essay “The Poet.” Crane reveals his indebtedness to an Emersonian tradition through his frequent allusions to Whitman throughout The Bridge. With these allusions Crane attempts to identify his work as an extension of Whitman’s own attempt to write a uniquely American epic poem reflecting his cultural moment. In “The Poet,” Emerson articulates the ambivalently passive and active prerogatives faced by the true poet. In Emerson’s conception the poet “is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty” (449); yet, in this role, the poet is not actively creating beauty, but is instead “naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence” (457). Thus, the poet creates language that is a belated record of the actual thing or idea that it represents. But the poet’s work is not only belated toward its object; it is also belated toward the language it uses to reflect the world, language that has previously been used for such representation. These conditions of language motivate Emerson to call the poet’s work “fossil poetry,” since “language is made up of images, tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (457).5

This dual sense of belatedness in language that Emerson describes, from both the object or concept it represents as well as from previous textual incarnations that make similar uses of language, aptly reflects the situation facing Crane in The Bridge. Crane’s poem seeks to name a conception of culture, but this naming can only occur after the
existence of that specific cultural moment; thus his naming belatedly reflects that moment rather than disregarding it in favor of the poem’s own autonomous coherence. Also, Crane must confront previous poetic expressions of American culture, for his poem represents a re-use, or “secondary use,” of poetic language in this capacity, with Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* as the most notable precedent in this tradition. Yet, despite his characterization of language use as a “fossil poetry” inherently belated from its world, Emerson subtly suggests the possibility for the poet to be more than a passive recorder of what preceded him:

> For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nations. (449)

This imperfection in the writing of poetry, which requires the poet to “substitute something of [his] own,” allows a poet such as Crane a greater autonomy in determining what is to be written. It also allows the poet to add creatively to how the objects and events of the world will be characterized in the poem, and through such additions the poet can introduce his own interpretations of the world with which he is presented. Thus, the poet can make an active contribution to the meaning of what is being recorded in the poem and to how its significance is conceived.

Crane’s engagement with his poetic role in *The Bridge* and the accompanying negotiations with language’s inherent belatedness are most notable in the first half of the poem, particularly in the two sections that follow the initial “Proem”, “Ave Maria” and “Powhatan’s Daughter.” Here Crane attempts to maintain the connection between his
cultural epic and the physical landscape of America, as he tries to reconcile his textual naming with the land’s preceding physical presence. Specifically, Crane attempts to identify the physical landscape of America with the figure of Pocahontas (Powhatan’s daughter), positing this landscape as the ground on which the poet can achieve a union with the native American, who Crane envisions as possessing an intimate and immediate knowledge of the landscape. As Crane attempts this identification and naming of the land, he enters into a larger economy of naming that pervades these early sections of *The Bridge* and highlights his negotiations with the inherent instability that arises between words and concepts in the process of representation.

In “Ave Maria,” the first full section of *The Bridge*, Crane assumes the voice of Columbus voyaging on the Atlantic, returning to Europe after his discovery of America. Columbus prays for safe passage so he may bring back the news of his discovery, yet it is a discovery that he has misnamed: “I bring you back Cathay!...The Chan’s great continent” (*CP* 48). Columbus misinterprets his discovery, wrongly identifying the land he found as “Cathay” rather than a “New World” to Europe in need of naming. Crane places an emphasis on the linguistic element of Columbus’ discovery, as Columbus prays for a safe return “before the tides can wrest away / The word I bring” (*CP* 48), even if this “word” is a mistaken one. Later in this section, Crane draws a contrast between this “word” that Columbus brings and the “incognizable Word / Of Eden” (*CP* 51) from which Columbus seeks guidance and protection.

The presence of this presumably transcendent, immutable “Word” draws attention to the imperfect and variable nature of Columbus’ own “word,” highlighting the potential for error inherent in the act of naming. Yet, on this occasion, this potential for error
suggests the power of misnaming, as the representational inaccuracy of Columbus’ news becomes secondary to its great force to alter the course of world history and to spawn the nation that is Crane’s concern. In these terms Columbus becomes a possible precursor for Crane—Columbus’ account of North America, despite its inaccuracies, becomes crucial to defining an American cultural identity. This suggestion that the force of a narrative (whether in Columbus’ or Crane’s narratives of America) could overcome its failure to represent accurately its source and still become culturally meaningful would likely offer some comfort to Crane as he faces the challenge of writing a representational poetry in *The Bridge*. Thus, Crane refuses to dismiss Columbus’ achievement, instead conceding its value until the last. In the achieved vision of *The Bridge’s* final section, “Atlantis,” Crane maintains this act of misnaming as an integral part of his own representation of American culture. The section (and *The Bridge*) ends as follows: “—One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay, / Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring / The serpent with the eagle in the leaves...? / Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (*CP* 117).

Crane draws further attention to the act of naming and its power to generate meaning (both in a local and national context) in the next section of *The Bridge*, “Powhatan’s Daughter.” But after Crane’s interest in the previous section in Columbus’ power to forge a culturally relevant work despite his representational inaccuracies, “Powhatan’s Daughter” returns the poem’s focus to its ability to convey an experience of America’s physical immediacy. This focus on physical immediacy arises as Crane begins to identify the American landscape with the historical figure of Pocahontas; in essence, Crane attempts to transfer the name of Pocahontas to the landscape. This section’s title immediately raises questions about where the authority to name resides: Pocahontas is
denied her own name at this point; instead her identity comes from her father’s authority in a paternalistic lineage. The epigraph to this section also highlights the instable and often contested meaning that arises from the act of naming, for it attempts to subvert the typically admirable status of Pocahontas by casting her as a young and seductive savage:

“—Pocahuntus, a well-featured but wanton yong girle...of the age of eleven or twelve years, get the boyes forth with her into the market place, and make them wheele, falling on their hands, turning their heels upwards, whom she would followe, and wheele so herself, naked as she was, all the fort over.” (CP 53)

This portrayal of Pocahontas comes from a modern debunking of the Pocahontas myth, which becomes significant as Crane comes to associate the figure of Pocahontas with the American landscape through the “Powhatan’s Daughter” section. For Crane will attempt to construct a homosexual conception of cultural knowledge with the union of the poet and the native American male, Maquokeeta, in “The Dance”—a union which is made possible by Pocahontas, although through her identification with the land she becomes only the mediator between the two men, rather than a sexual partner.

This connection between Pocahontas and the American landscape first appears in “Harbor Dawn,” the first poem in this section. Following the “Ave Maria” section and its consideration of Columbus’ voyage back to Europe, “Harbor Dawn” brings The Bridge back to Crane’s contemporary setting, New York, as the poet awakens to the sounds of the harbor: “And then a truck will lumber past the wharves / As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck” (CP 54). Crane envisions awakening not alone but with a lover (“And you beside me, blessed now while sirens / Sing to us, stealthily weave us into day” [CP 54]), and the marginal notes that accompany “Harbor Dawn” begin the association between this lover and the American landscape: “Who is the woman with us in the
dawn?…whose is the flesh our feet have moved upon?” (CP 57). Interestingly, the identity of this lover figure is initially anonymous, again contributing to the sense of uncertainty involved in the act of naming. The reason for employing this tone of uncertainty becomes clearer as Crane builds toward the homosexual union of “The Dance”: it is this instability in the act of naming that allows Crane to refigure Pocahontas as no longer an active figure in the union between the native Americans and Europeans but rather as the ground on which the poet and Maquokeeta come together. This new role remains an important one, even as it casts her as a less active and vital player, serving as an essentially passive mediator between the two men. This initial allusion to Pocahontas in “Harbor Dawn” begins to set these ambivalent terms in motion with its unusual juxtaposition of images: a woman with whom the poet has shared an intimate embrace becomes transfigured as the ground upon which he walks, “the flesh our feet have moved upon.” Thus, Crane begins the process of recasting Pocahontas as an object of misplaced desire, one that in this section’s epigraph appears immature and manipulative.

Crane’s efforts to identify the physical landscape with Pocahontas continue most explicitly in “The River,” the third poem in the “Powhatan’s Daughter” section. Importantly, this poem begins with a flurry of brand names and consumer products, “the din and slogans of the year” (CP 63) visible from a train that speeds across the country. Crane describes this initial passage in a letter to his benefactor, Otto Kahn, in which he explains some of The Bridge’s important episodes: “The extravagance of the first twenty-three lines of this section is an intentional burlesque on the cultural confusion of the present—a great conglomeration of noises analogous to the strident impression of a fast express rushing by” (L 306). Crane expresses this cultural confusion as a surplus of
names and naming driven by consumerism: “Stick your patent name on a signboard / brother...Tintex—Japalac—Certain-teed Overalls” (CP 62). This confusion is further compounded by technology, with its “telegraphic night coming on” and its “fast express rushing by.” The content of these passages reaffirms Crane’s commitment to portraying his contemporary cultural conditions, but with a crucial awareness of the potential confusion inherent in these conditions. This confusion represents another challenge that The Bridge must face, for such “cultural confusion” must ultimately be overcome as Crane seeks to affirm the value of his contemporary era.

After this initial episode of “cultural confusion” in “The River,” Crane makes a deliberate turn away from the most visible economic and technological advances of his time, instead seeking a more immediate, concrete knowledge of the American landscape. The poem’s focus shifts to the “three men, still hungry on the tracks” (CP 62) left behind by the speeding train and its accompanying blur of advertisements. After a section break, Crane’s imagery takes us a step further away from the pace of modern life: “The last bear, shot drinking in the Dakotas / Loped under wires that span the mountain stream” (CP 64). Crane’s turn to these men does not allow a complete escape from the modernized world—even seemingly remote locations have been touched by the technological impositions of the telegraph line. Yet the hobos Crane has left on the tracks exist in contrast to these advances: “Keen instruments, strung to a vast precision / Bind town to town and dream to ticking dream. / But some men take their liquor slow...” (CP 64). The slow, plodding pace of the hobos associates them with an earlier moment in American history, thus reinforcing Crane’s desire to account for such influences in his
vision of the cultural present. The sense of the past suggested by these men also causes

Crane to look back to his own childhood:

Behind
My father’s cannery works I used to see
Rail-squatters ranged in nomad raillery,
The ancient men—wifeless or runaway
Hobo-trekkers that forever search
An empire wilderness of freight and rails. (CP 64)

The presence of these hobos extends the poem’s homosexual subtext, or at least
adds a homosocial element to this subtext, which continues to move the poem toward the
poet’s union with the native male. The “rail-squatters” also forward Crane’s effort to
know the land and associate it with Pocahontas, for Crane as poet is able to experience
the physical body of the land—“I knew her body there” (CP 66)—just as he experienced
the initial lover figure in “Harbor Dawn.” But these hobos have experienced the body of
the land as well, even before Crane has done so, and it is through their embrace that
Crane can better know the land’s meaning. Thus, the presence of these hobos, as well as
their continuation of the poem’s homosexual subtext, help to transform Pocahontas from
Crane’s intimate lover in “Harbor Dawn” to a more collective, symbolic lover for all
those who tread upon her, for “they touch something like a key perhaps”:

From pole to pole across the hills, the states
—They know a body under the wide rain;
Youngsters with eyes like fjords, old reprobates
With racetrack jargon,—dotting immensity
They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast
Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue— (CP 66)

Here Crane widens the scope of interaction with the landscape, as he does not assume
sole responsibility for acquiring an understanding of its physical features—instead he
defers to the original efforts of these wanderers. The terms by which they find this
understanding are significant as well: generations of these “rail-squatters” freely roam and explore the passive landscape body. Citing such a precedent mitigates the challenge for Crane of renaming the land and refiguring the identity of Pocahontas, as he can now place his own efforts within the preexisting (though clearly marginalized) context of those who presumably know the land best. Interestingly, however, these “wanderers” have achieved only a limited knowledge of this symbolic landscape, as the marginal gloss in “The River” describes: “...those whose addresses are never near but who have touched her, knowing her without name nor the myths of her fathers” (CP 65-7). From Crane’s perspective, these hobos possess a degree of ignorance that limits the extent of their understanding; they do not know her name or her possible origins (or the previous attempts to assign her a cultural role). Therefore, Crane need not submit to their precedent as an authoritative understanding; it remains malleable to Crane’s own revisions of the land’s true name and identity.

This ignorance in the “wanderers,” however, does not only allow Crane to assert his own meanings and values where none were previously established. Their example can also serve as model for Crane—an ignorance he can adopt in the slightly altered guise of an intentional forgetfulness, an act of ignoring the preceding history of Pocahontas that does not contribute to Crane’s progress toward a homosexual union between himself and the native American male. For historically Pocahontas’ union with the English settler John Rolfe plays a crucial role in easing hostilities between the native Americans and white settlers. Through his willed ignorance Crane is able to recast Pocahontas’ role: no longer does she enter into marriage with the European man (historically, John Rolfe; symbolically in this instance, Crane as poet and constructor of this cultural vision);
instead she becomes the passive ground upon which the union between the poet and Maquoikeeta can be made. As Crane describes in his letter to Kahn, “Pocahontas (the continent) is the common basis of our meeting” (L 307).

As “The River” continues, this transforming and refiguring of Pocahontas progresses in a complex association of imagery, and again the hobos play a significant role. Crane discusses these “wanderers” in his explanatory letter to Kahn, describing them as “psychological vehicles, also. Their wanderings as you will notice, carry the reader into interior after interior, finally to the great River” (L 306). Crane’s notion of “psychological” “interiors” suggests a move toward more associative and less discursive language, or in Crane’s own terms, a move away from traditional logic and toward a “logic of metaphor.” Of course, Crane’s poetic style is typically complex and dense with imagery; but his statement to Kahn suggests that as these hobos delve deeper into the interior of the American landscape, the poem, too, will rely less on surface connections and more on fleeting associations of images.

Such a suggestive image occurs as Crane explains his own knowledge of the feminized landscape: “But I knew her body there, / Time like a serpent down her shoulders, dark, / And space, an eaglet’s wing, laid on her hair” (CP 66). The crucial image here is that of “Time” as a “serpent” laying across the land’s “shoulders”—its phallic connotations contrast with the feminized landscape, and the notion of “Time” implies movement and progress, which also contrasts with Crane’s passive depictions of the landscape. This sense of movement and progress also arises as the image lays across the body, draping down its “shoulders,” suggesting the motion of the rivers that cross the American landscape—especially Crane’s “great River” at the land’s interior, the
Mississippi. Within this pattern of imagery, the masculinized movement of the river marks and divides the more passive, feminized landscape, as the river flows with the passage of time. Later in this poem Crane describes the river in a similar fashion: “Down, down—born pioneers in time’s despite, / Grimed tributaries to an ancient flow” (CP 68). Similarly, Crane associates the river’s progress with the generational progress of patriarchy—“What are you, lost within the tideless spell? / You are your father’s father” (CP 69)—suggesting that within the river’s flow identity becomes decidedly masculine and patriarchal.

Thus, in this portion of “The River,” Crane establishes two groupings of imagery: on one hand, Pocahontas as the American landscape, passive and static, there to be experienced by those in contact with her; and, on the other hand, the masculinized movement of the river, part of the progression of time, crossing the land and delineating its boundaries. To support this latter grouping further, at the end of “The River,” Crane again posits the river’s motion as a temporal progression, particularly an historical one: “The River lifts itself from its long bed, // Poised wholly on its dream, a mustard glow / Tortured with history, its one will—flow!” (CP 69). This notion of the river being “tortured with history” is an apt one in the scheme Crane has established, for as he attempts to forge his vision he finds himself repeatedly struggling with his belated position toward his cultural and historical precedents. Crane envisions the river in this poem as part of an authoritative history, which makes it more difficult to dismiss—in fact, he addresses figures of authority as part of the river’s motion: “look see, / O Sheriff, Brakeman and Authority…For you, too, feed the River timelessly” (CP 68). Further, after asserting the patriarchal role of the river, Crane includes an appalling image from
America’s economic history and its exploitation of African labor: “You are your father’s father, and the stream— / A liquid theme that floating niggers swell” (61). Finally, the river’s flow includes the remnants of its colonial past: “Over De Soto’s bones the freighted floors / Throb past the City storied of three thrones” (CP 69).

Such images reinforce the historical realities of the river and its association with traditional models of patriarchal authority. These images also reveal the limited potential of Crane’s affected stance of forgetfulness toward the landscape’s accrued meanings, the stance borrowed from the ignorant hobos. Such forgetfulness, if perfectly applied, suggests the possibility of an original encounter with the physical landscape and an original act of naming it. Yet Crane finds that the historical realities that have shaped America’s identity continue to resurface, reminding him of the challenges involved in his efforts to forge his own cultural vision. Thus, the clusters of imagery from this passage of “The River” loosely reiterate the challenges that Crane faces as he moves toward a more representational poetry in The Bridge. On one hand, an appeal to Pocahontas as landscape offers a more immediate, physical experience of an essential component of American identity less mastered by traditional conceptions of history. Yet, on the other hand, the association of the river with traditional, patriarchal conceptions of history and progress cannot be completely dismissed by Crane—the cultural relevance and vitality he seeks for his version of America’s true cultural character will inevitably bear some similarities to traditional conceptions of history, despite his efforts to find spaces where this historical authority can be reimagined and rewritten.

As The Bridge moves toward the poet’s union with Maquokeeta in “The Dance,” it continues to utilize ideas associated with both the river and the land to move toward
this goal. The first four stanzas of “The Dance” maintain the link between Pocahontas and the landscape, emphasizing again her passive, feminized qualities: “There was a veil upon you, Pocahontas, bride—/ O Princess whose brown lap was virgin May; And bridal flanks and eyes hid tawny pride” (CP 70). After these four stanzas, however, Crane makes a deliberate move away from this particular landscape, again using the path of the river to draw a contrast with the land: “I left the village for dogwood. By the canoe/ Tugging below the mill-race, I could see/ Your hair’s keen crescent running” (CP 70). But as Crane moves away from the initial setting and approaches the dance of Maquokeeta, he finds himself moving into a less receptive and more foreboding landscape: “I gained the ledge;/ Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends/ And northward reaches” (CP 72).

This change in landscape moves the poem away from the previous dichotomy of imagery, for the shift in focus to the male figure, Maquokeeta, does not convey the same masculine associations with traditional conceptions of authority that occurred in “The River”—the native American’s marginalized status in American history undermines such associations. Instead, this “steep, inaccessible” setting offers a suitably remote location for Crane to achieve a union with Maquokeeta and, in more general terms, to achieve a greater understanding of the native landscape. As Crane explains in his letter to Kahn, in this section he must “become identified with the Indian and his world before it is over”; he also explains the physical and sensual terms of this identification: “I think I really succeed in getting under the skin of this glorious and dying animal” (L 307). At first this identification appears to be at the expense of Pocahontas: “Dance, Maquokeeta: Pocahontas grieves” (CP 73); and by the end of “The Dance” Crane has achieved his
desired union: “We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms, / In cobalt desert
closures made vows” (CP 75). Yet the role of Pocahontas is not completely diminished,
and toward the end of this poem Crane sings her praises once again, recapturing the tone
used in “The River”:

High unto Labrador the sun strikes free
Her speechless dream of snow, and stirred again,
She is the torrent and the singing tree;
And she is virgin to the last of men...

West, west and south! winds over Cumberland
And winds across the llano grass resume

Her hair’s warm sibilance. Her breasts are fanned
O stream by slope and vineyard—into bloom! (CP 74)

Crane chooses not to dismiss the image of Pocahontas he has established even when his
desired union with Maquokeeta has been achieved, for the connection between
Pocahontas and the physical landscape remains a crucial component of Crane’s project of
forging a more vital, immediate conception of American culture. Instead, Crane continues
to emphasize Pocahontas’ essential role in his project, despite the continually passive,
accommodating role she plays—“speechless” and “virgin to the last of men.”

The intentionally marginalized, ahistorical space that Crane creates for his union
with Maquokeeta reflects his desire to forge an alternate version of American culture, one
reflective of “our America” and “our unique identity”—that this union is a homosexual
one also requires a marginalized space for its consummation. As we see in the first half of
The Bridge, the act of naming (or in many instances renaming) plays a vital role as Crane
negotiates his desires both to construct an original and more accurate vision of American
culture and to ally his work with previous efforts at capturing a similar vision. Essential
to negotiating these two imperatives is the inherent variability in the act of naming—a fact Crane draws particular attention to when describing his relationship to the personified landscape in “The River”:

—As I have trod the rumorous midnights, too,

And past the circuit of the lamp’s thin flame
(O Nights that brought me to her body bare!)
Have dreamed beyond the print that bound her name. (CP 66)

Here Crane directly addresses the inherent linguistic element involved in naming, as well as in the material act of putting ideas into writing (or into “print”). Despite the best efforts of language, a part of the object named remains beyond the signifier that attempts to contain it, and here Crane suggests that the physical reality of the landscape, “her body bare,” cannot be fully contained by the language used to represent it. The novelty to Crane of his project in The Bridge—writing a poetry that will convey the cultural conditions of his contemporary era—brings this inevitable gap in representation into greater focus, for Crane must now be more attentive to what lies “beyond the print” of his own poetic text. The reality of this representational gap is at times a source of consternation for Crane, yet it proves advantageous as he seeks to refigure Pocahontas’ identity, for the malleability of the previous textual representations of Pocahontas’ life allows for the significance of that life to be reconceived on Crane’s own terms. Of course, Crane’s act of renaming is subject to the same vagaries of interpretation and the same potential refiligurings by subsequent readers—which helps to explain why Crane refuses to dismiss entirely the progressive flow of history and technology in “The River.” Instead, Crane keeps in contact with these historical materials, appropriating them when
necessary to add validity to his project and using these materials to assuage his anxieties about the position of poetic authority he must occupy to forge such an ambitious cultural vision.

IV.

In the opening passages of “The River,” Crane took a clear step back from the “cultural confusion” instigated by the commercial and technological advances of his era, despite the necessity of accounting for these unique developments as part of the poem’s cultural component. This trepidation toward the advances of technology resurfaces in “Cape Hatteras,” the fourth section of *The Bridge* (which consists of the single poem “Cape Hatteras”). As he confronts the technological marvel of the airplane in this section, Crane directly invokes the preceding voice of Whitman, seeking the comfort and assurance of a continuity between Whitman's cultural vision and his own. Again, Crane finds himself working in the space between two imperatives: he seeks to incorporate the novelty of technology (in this case the airplane) into his poem, thus emphasizing the contemporaneity of his cultural vision. But at the same time Crane attempts to maintain a connection with an accepted tradition in order to shore up his work’s cultural relevance, as he did to a degree in “The River.” But the tradition with which Crane aligns his own work with his explicit invocation of Whitman (and implicit invocation of an Emersonian tradition) represents a significant move by Crane in positioning his work against his modernist contemporaries. Crane’s appeal to Whitman and Emerson constitutes an appeal to a distinctly American tradition, for both Emerson and Whitman made vital contributions to the ongoing project of distinguishing American culture from its
European antecedents. This move, then, suggests Crane’s desire to make “a complete reverse of direction” from Eliot, as his focus on the local and native conditions of American culture contrasts sharply with Eliot’s interests in a heavily European and international conception of his cultural precursors.⁸

Crane’s desire to ally his work with the American tradition of Emerson draws greater attention to Crane’s choice of epigraph for “Cape Hatteras”: “The seas all crossed, weathered the capes, the voyage done” (CP 87). This epigraph comes from a poem, “Passage to India,” in which Whitman himself struggles to define a cultural present that is compatible with an awareness of the past. In the first section of “Passage to India,” Whitman posits a scheme in which the past represents the incorruptible source of the present, with both terms existing in a seamless continuum:

The past—the infinite greatness of the past!  
For what is the present after all but the growth out of the past?  
(As a projectile form’d, impell’d, passing a certain line, still keeps on,  
So the present, utterly form’d, impell’d by the past.) (305)

Such continuity and interrelatedness between present and past nearly obviate the need for a distinction between these terms, as each moment in this scheme represents a unified step in an unquestioned teleology. In “Passage to India” Whitman seeks to subsume within time’s steady progression the great mechanical and technological advances of his own modern age—specifically, the completions of the transcontinental railroad, the trans-Atlantic telegraph line, and the Suez Canal. Whitman employs his great optimism and poetic force toward justifying such progress as part of “God’s purpose,” which also includes:
The earth to be spann’d, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together. (305)

Whitman’s consistently optimistic voice suggests the inevitable success of his project to incorporate the advances of the present into the immutable march of progress. Yet later in the poem Whitman alludes to another who will complete the project that he has started. Whitman looks for the inevitable, “projectile”-like movement from past to present to lead toward a definite future in which “God’s purpose” becomes reality: “Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, / The true son of God shall come singing his songs” (308). Further, the result shall be an idealized cultural vision: “Nature and Man shall be disjoin’d and diffused no more, / The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them” (308). Thus, despite the seeming ease with which Whitman’s vision can absorb his era’s technological advances, he still sees the achievement of a unified cultural vision as an ongoing process that awaits a truer poet to complete it. This stance by Whitman would likely be amenable to Crane’s project, as Crane would not have to cede his own vision so fully to Whitman’s and could see himself as attempting to fill this role of the true poet, “the true son of God.”

Crane begins “Cape Hatteras” with his own temporal musings, which expand the scope of time beyond Whitman’s perspective, suggesting Crane’s desire to immediately differentiate his poem from Whitman’s. Crane considers time in a geological sense, which seems to minimize the importance of human existence:

Imponderable the dinosaur
  sinks slow,
  the mammoth suarian
  ghoul, the eastern
While rises in the west the coastwise range,
slowly the hushed land—
Combustion at the astral core—the dorsal change
Of energy—convulsive shift of sand… (CP 88)

These lines that begin “Cape Hatteras” quickly alter the temporal context of *The Bridge*, as the previous sections of the poem established an ostensibly sequential time-frame: “Ave Maria” takes place just after Columbus’ initial discovery of the New World; the individual sections of “Powhatan’s Daughter” consider several American historical figures and myths from the time since Columbus’ landing—the lives of Pocahontas and Rip Van Winkle, the European settling of the American West, the movements along the Mississippi, etc.; and “Cutty Sark,” the section preceding “Cape Hatteras,” brought the poem back to Crane’s present day. With these first lines of “Cape Hatteras,” however, Crane extends the poem’s scope back to the earth’s formation, invoking the primal forces that shaped its surface. If the Whitman of “Passage to India” serves as a major source for Crane in “Cape Hatteras,” then Crane immediately outdistances Whitman’s own purview, for Whitman’s attempt to discover a progressive unity involving both present and past stretches back to “Adam and Eve” only, “To reason’s early paradise […] to wisdom’s birth” (307, 310).

In a sense, it seems that Crane is attempting to one-up Whitman, setting his sights on a grander version and vision of unity by encompassing a planetary time-frame, rather than simply an American one. Yet the presumed desire on Crane’s part to discover some relevance in these ancient, geological forces, to reveal their meaningfulness as the poem builds toward its “cultural synthesis,” becomes a significant struggle before “Cape Hatteras” even gets started. After the initial description of these prehistoric forces, Crane
finds himself still “in thrall” to the American soil, “our native clay,” which is “veined by all that time has really pledged us…” (CP 88, Crane’s ellipsis). But what has been “pledged” by “time”? Crane is not clear about the answer, which infuses “Cape Hatteras” with a sense of confusion and uncertainty from the start. Instead, “time” becomes deceptive:

\[
\text{[...]while time clears} \\
\text{Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects} \\
\text{A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain} \\
\text{Our eyes can share or answer—then deflects} \\
\text{Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed} \\
\text{Where each sees only his dim past reversed… (CP 88)}
\]

The initial clarity that “time” seems to offer becomes replaced by a “labyrinth” that reveals only a “dim past reversed,” rather than any insight into the present. These early passages cast a feel of uncertainty over “Cape Hatteras” that seems at odds with Crane’s desire to produce an affirmation of his cultural present; his attempts to connect with the past and a Whitmanic tradition seem, at least early in this section, only to make a clear expression of the cultural present more strained.

Thus, despite the allusion in this section’s epigraph to “Passage to India,” in which Whitman confidently proclaims a unified progression from past to present, Crane finds himself unable to strike a similarly confident voice that would connect the diverse temporal elements introduced in the beginning of this section. Instead, at the beginning of the third stanza, Crane introduces a static, rather than progressive, image: “But that star-glistered salver of infinity, / The circle, blind crucible of endless space, / Is sluiced by motion,—subjugated never” (CP 89). This circular image of the sky anticipates Crane’s interest in the airplane as a modern technological marvel throughout “Cape Hatteras.”
But this image of “the circle,” with its connection to “infinity,” also suggests an alternative to the progress of time, a stasis in the face of time’s “motion.” Crane offers a similarly circular image in the fifth stanza of “Cape Hatteras,” as he praises the “oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!” (CP 90). These recurring images, considered in the abstract, offer a respite from the steady teleology of Whitman’s vision, or at the very least a differently configured vision of past, present, and future: rather than being plotted points in a ceaseless motion forward, the circle implies the possibility of ideas or values recurring periodically. Interspersed among these circular images are Crane’s doubts about whether his historical moment can be infused with a meaningfulness similar to that of Whitman’s own time—or, to put it another way, Crane wonders if an intimation of infinity can recur: “Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity / Be still the same as when you walked the beach / Near Paumanok—your lone patrol” (CP 89). Crane fears that the changes in his own time are too great to share any continuity with Whitman’s era, as “The nasal whine of power whips a new universe,” one in which “Man hears himself an engine in a cloud” (CP 90). Crane’s insertion of a circular scheme, where insights might recur, alongside Whitman’s teleological scheme, allows for the possibility of failure in Crane’s efforts to fit his contemporary experience into a meaningful pattern: in such a circular scheme, a moment of loss or disillusionment would not have to indicate a derailment of historical progress. Instead, moments of uncertainty that seem incompatible with a larger, progressive vision may only represent a brief misstep before the apprehension of that vision recurs.

Still, Crane initially makes a wholesale effort to incorporate into his poem one of his era’s most significant technological advances, the airplane. Crane forcefully attempts
to affect a tone of praise when describing the inception of the airplane, that “sinewy silver biplane, nudging the wind’s withers!” (CP 90). Crane’s account of the Wright brothers’ first flight indicates its transcendent potential:

There, from Kill Devils Hill at Kitty Hawk
Two brothers in their twinship left the dune;
Warping the gale, the Wright windwrestlers veered
Capeward, then blading the wind’s flank, banked and spun
What ciphers risen from prophetic script,
What marathons new-set between the stars! (CP 90)

Critics such as L. S. Dembo and Susan M. Schultz have discussed the appearance in “Cape Hatteras” of the notion of Verticalism, “a rewriting of the ancient myth of flight, which attributed divine qualities to the airplane.”9 Crane clearly affords a spiritual potential to the airplane, and when it becomes an instrument for war Crane’s initial tone is surprisingly unchanged: “O bright circumferences, heights employed to fly / War’s fiery kennel masked in downy offings,— / This tournament of space, the threshold and chiselled height” (CP 91).

Yet the use of the airplane as a machine of war poses a significant challenge to Crane in two ways: first, such destructive potential obviously hampers Crane’s desire to forge a less pessimistic vision of his age than that offered by Eliot; and second, this destructive potential complicates Crane’s hope that his own cultural vision can be made compatible with Whitman’s unerringly optimistic notion of historical progress. The ability of the airplane to maintain its spiritual trajectory, in light of its potential for war, eventually falters, in spite of Crane’s beseeching of the “Falcon-Ace” to remember his “Sanskrit charge / to conjugate infinity’s dim marge” (CP 92). The airplane’s ascent finally leads to a fall, as it tumbles “down gravitation’s / vortex into crashed /
....dispersion...into mashed and shapeless debris” (CP 92-3). Thus, the spiritual potential of this image of Crane’s era goes unfulfilled, and its potential to be an extension of Whitman’s unified cultural vision fails as well. This latter failure is particularly significant to Crane because it also marks his failure to assume the role as the “true son of God” that Whitman prophesied, the poet who could absorb the mechanized age into the unerring progress of human triumph. In essence, Crane cannot sustain the gap that opens between the airplane as ascendant symbol of technological advance and its darker counter-narrative as a new and potent weapon of war. Instead, the image of the airplane appears to be (almost literally) weighed down by its more somber historical reality, thus stifling Crane’s desire to ascend toward the higher potential of his cultural vision. In this instance, then, the imperative to keep his notion of American culture rooted in historical and material fact, as well as to keep the internal coherence of the poem in some proximity to the external reality that will insure its accessibility and meaningfulness to others, stymies Crane’s progress toward the “cultural synthesis” he seeks for The Bridge.

Again, an awareness of the sequence of composition of The Bridge adds further significance to this section of the poem. As one of the late sections added to the poem to improve its unity and coherence, “Cape Hatteras” was written at the furthest remove from “Atlantis,” which became the poem’s final section and ecstatic affirmation. This fact suggests a growing awareness on Crane’s part of the limits of his project in maintaining its commitment to the concrete details of his contemporary era. In “Cape Hatteras” Crane appears to be acknowledging the troubling aspects of technological progress and the difficulties of incorporating such elements into his affirmative cultural vision. In terms of the published sequence of the poem, however, the rise and fall of the airplane’s spiritual
quest possess a certain logic. With its placement roughly in the middle of the sequence, “Cape Hatteras” offers a failed attempt to transcend the physical bounds of space and time, essentially a necessary failure, in the progression toward the achieved vision of “Atlantis.” On its own terms, however, and in relation to the “Powhawtan’s Daughter” section of the poem, “Cape Hatteras” and its failure to assimilate the airplane into Crane’s project contrasts with his relative success with negotiating the challenges of representation in “The River” and “The Dance.”

Importantly, though, Crane does not end “Cape Hatteras” with the fiery crash of the airplane. Instead, after the insertion of a section-break, Crane resumes his address to Whitman, seeking again to wed his poem to Whitman’s ecstatic vision. Early in this second half of “Cape Hatteras” Crane turns again to Whitman as the visionary source that can still transform Crane’s modern age:

But who has held the heights more sure than thou,  
O Walt!—Ascensions of thee hover in me now  
As thou at junctions elegiac, there, of speed  
With vast eternity, dost wield the rebound seed!  
The competent loam, the probable grass,—travail  
Of tides awash the pedestal of Everest, fail  
Not less than thou in pure impulse inbred  
To answer deepest soundings! O, upward from the dead  
Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound  
Of living brotherhood! (CP 93)

Again, when we read the poem in its published sequence, the failure of the airplane’s spiritual potential suggests a necessary step in the poem’s overall progression, and Crane’s choice to turn back to Whitman after that failure suggests a desire to maintain the poem’s optimism as it continues to build hopefully toward its final section. However, because “Cape Hatteras” is one of the final sections of the poem that Crane composed,
this turning back to Whitman also suggests that Crane was not comfortable ending his
years of work on the poem with the literally smashing failure of the airplane’s spiritual
quest. Instead, Crane tries to revive the connection between his work and Whitman’s
vision that began “Cape Hatteras,” seeking to bring Whitman “upward from the dead.” In
this latter portion of “Cape Hatteras,” Crane even attempts to obviate his own failure by
describing Whitman as still the true poet and visionary, “afoot again” on “The Open
Road” and leading the humbled Crane: “no, never to let go / My hand / in yours, / Walt
Whitman” (CP 95). Crane envisions Whitman as the poet able to overcome his
limitations, including his temporal predicament—“Not greatest, thou,—not first, nor last”
(CP 94)—to become the true author of the cultural vision for which Crane has struggled:

Our Meistersinger, thou set breath in steel;
And it was thou who on the boldest heel
Stood up and flung the span on even wing
Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing! (CP 94)

Crane’s praise of Whitman may seem a humble acknowledgement of his poem’s
indebtedness to the tradition that Whitman had helped to establish; but in this specific
context it signifies a refutation of the Whitmanic vision with which “Cape Hatteras”
began, that of “Passage to India.” In that poem Whitman very clearly eschews the role of
ture poet in favor of one who will come later as “the true son of God”; this later poet will
then be able to “absolutely fuse” the disparate elements of “Man and Nature,” becoming
the true bard of Emerson’s “The Poet.” By designating Whitman as the true poet who
forged the bridge as part of this cultural vision, Crane essentially passes back to Whitman
the role that Whitman had already refused, and which more logically would have to be
adopted by Crane. But after his failure to assimilate the airplane’s spiritual potential into
his own vision in the first half of “Cape Hatteras,” Crane apparently considers himself unable to complete the task set forth by Whitman and tries to return this responsibility to its originator.

By the end of “Cape Hatteras” we find Crane struggling most seriously with the multiple impulses and imperatives that have come to shape his epic poem. Both Crane’s desire to forge a counterstatement to Eliot’s “pessimistic” conception of the modern era and to find validity in his work’s connections to Whitman’s unerringly optimistic are undercut by the threatening historical realities of the modern era as witnessed in the airplane. Yet the veracity of these details concerning the airplane’s violent potential make it impossible for Crane to omit this episode from his struggle to capture the experience of his era. Such challenges can account for Crane’s seemingly confused approach in “Cape Hatteras”: the original invocation of Whitman’s “Passage to India,” with its strongly linear conception of progress, is then complicated by the notion of recurrence and repetition suggested by the circular images. This confusion also arises with Crane’s initial attempt to build on Whitman’s precedent, to take the existing tradition and make it valid for Crane’s contemporary era. Crane then, surprisingly, turns back to Whitman and attempts to return the role of poet to his predecessor, which undermines Crane’s efforts to forge a cultural vision that is uniquely contemporary, arising from the concrete details of his experience.

V.

After “Cape Hatteras” Crane confronts further obstacles in his progression toward the poem’s final affirmation in “Atlantis.” The struggle to overcome these obstacles,
however, does not reveal the same level of complexity as Crane’s struggles with his poetic project in “Cape Hatteras.” In “Quaker Hill,” Crane confronts those in his contemporary society that are unlikely to find relevance in his conception of their modern culture, the materialistic, country-club denizens of the American twenties, “the Czars / Of golf” (CP 105). Crane’s awareness of these modern-day Philistines reemphasizes his notion of providing his cultural vision for a particular community, expressing “our unique identity” for “our America.” But these people and their deaf ears do not appear to be a substantial obstacle to Crane’s vision. Instead, their inclusion is more of an indication of Crane’s desire to include the realities of his cultural moment—even those elements of that reality that may not reflect Crane’s cultural values.

After moving past these social impediments to his vision, Crane faces a more subjective, psychological challenge in “The Tunnel,” as a ride on the subway becomes a metaphorical journey through a “hades in the brain” (CP 110). In “The Tunnel” Crane faces the figure of Poe, who assists Crane in moving beyond his excessive appeals to Whitman in “Cape Hatteras.” After struggling with Whitman’s optimism, we get the dark and foreboding example of Poe in this subterranean world. Crane also faces the confusing din of voices in the subway—but unlike the confused ads and brand names of commercialism at the beginning of “The River,” these voices in the subway are more easily overcome in this section of the poem. This is because of the structure of the poem and the function of “The Tunnel” within that structure: as the next to last section of The Bridge, this section offers the anticipated challenge before Crane reaches the sustained
vision of “Atlantis” at the end of the poem. As part of this structure, then, the confusion of “The Tunnel” represents a reiteration of Eliot’s pessimistic stance, which Crane will transcend in the poem’s final section.

This final section, “Atlantis,” represents the delivery at last of that ecstatic vision that Crane sought for his epic poem (and which he wrote first). In this final section much of Crane’s language suggests the apotheosis of a symbolic and metaphysical bridge transcending the bounds of the material world, which is the sense of the bridge that has led critics to see the poem striving to transcend Crane’s contemporary era rather than capture it. This sense begins with the epigraph to “Atlantis,” taken from Plato: “Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system” (CP 113). Throughout “Atlantis” Crane emphasizes this musical quality in his imaginatively refigured bridge, as well as its tendency to move upward, to rise toward an ethereal plane. But amid the transformation of the Brooklyn Bridge into the “Everpresence” of symbol, “Atlantis” also includes within this newly transformed bridge a decisive historical and cultural element. Crane describes this symbolic bridge as possessing “labyrinthine mouths of history / Pouring reply” (CP 114). This “labyrinthine” quality of the historical sources that Crane has incorporated into The Bridge suggests their complexity in the multi-faceted representational scheme that Crane has constructed up to this point. This passage does not, however, suggest that these historical realities are to be elided as the poem reaches its final apotheosis. After all, when Crane addresses this symbolic bridge as “Thou steeled Cognizance,” this sense of knowledge implicit within the bridge surely alludes to the understanding of the particular cultural sense, Crane’s sense of “our America” and “our collective identity,” that the poem has struggled to achieve.
Thus, the way in which the bridge in “Atlantis” has come to reflect the images and allusions from the previous sections of *The Bridge* does not minimize the poem’s representational function but instead draws greater attention to it. For so much of the poem has been a struggle to find the poetic means for characterizing the diverse materials that constitute Crane’s particular sense of his cultural moment, and to ground that poetry in a direct, immediate sense of experience, whether of the Brooklyn Bridge itself or of the American landscape to which *The Bridge* extends. As Crane describes the symbolic bridge in this final section, he reveals its power to work as a text in its own right, to generate meaning:

—O Choir, translating time
Into what multitudinous Verb the suns
And synergy of waters ever fuse, recast
In myriad syllables,—Psalm of Cathay! (CP 115)

The power of Crane’s symbolic bridge to make a “Verb” of “time” characterizes the overall function of *The Bridge*: throughout the poem Crane has taken pertinent historical materials (Columbus, Pocahontas, the westward settlement of the plains) and made them into a meaningful and active representation of the cultural nexus that constitutes Crane’s sense of his contemporary era. This sense of a “multitudinous Verb” suggests the dynamic nature of the conditions Crane’s text captures; a translation into a “Noun” would suggest a more static and traditional sense of *The Bridge*’s symbolic function. Crane’s allusion back to Columbus’ account of “Cathay” emphasizes this potential to construct a unique version of culture—one whose greatest veracity lies in the immediacy of its experience above its adherence to historical fact.
Crane and Winters carried on an extensive correspondence during the twenties and early thirties, until Crane’s death in 1932. Their correspondence was a complex one, marked at times by shared tastes and interests, yet also by significant diversions in their respective visions of the proper course for American poetry. For an extensive and engaging discussion of these exchanges, see Thomas Parkinson’s book, *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*.

2 From *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, Brom Weber, ed., New York: Liveright, 1966, page 220. All citations from this volume will be indicated by *CP*, followed by the page number. Quotations from *The Letters of Hart Crane* will be indicated with an *L*, followed by the page number.

3 Crane even lived for a time in the same room in which Roebling stayed. See Trachtenberg, page 144.

4 For example, in *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane’s Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire*, Lee Edelman discusses “the way in which breaking as a theme in Crane’s poetry narrates or allegorizes the rhetorical fracturing of syntax throughout his work, a fracturing that marks his desire to violate or break free of limiting linguistic and literary conventions. Thus Crane’s poetry, in my reading, expands inward, anatomizing and troping upon its rhetorical construction in order to redefine the language of literary modernism and to reaffirm the creative potential that derives from a recognition of the textuality of word and world alike” (6-7). Mutlu Blasing places a similar emphasis on the rhetorical and linguistic function of Crane’s poetry: “The Bridge draws the line between history and meaning, for it anatomizes the bridging operations of language itself and thus exposes the rhetoric of epic poetry…The diacritical interplay of fusion and diffusion in his poems places them at the source of linguistic articulation and constitutes an ironic dissection of both formalism and organicism” (188-9).

5 Harold Bloom argues for this sense of belatedness as pervasive in all literary language, an argument he makes most explicitly in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*. Bloom specifically discusses Crane and his relationship to Emerson in his “Centenary Introduction” and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisonism*.

6 See Jared Gardner’s “‘Our Native Clay’: Racial and Sexual Identity and the Making of Americans in *The Bridge*.”

7 Crane discusses his concept of the “logic of metaphor” in his essay “General Aims and Theories,” describing it as an “organic principle…which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension” (*CP* 221). For a further discussion of this concept, see Irwin’s essay.

8 Winters takes the opportunity of discussing Crane’s poem to demonstrate what he sees as the moral and philosophical shortcomings of the Emersonian ethos to which Crane also falls victim.
From Schulz, page 60. Schultz argues that Crane seeks to rewrite Whitman in “Cape Hatteras,” absorbing the failure of Whitman’s vision so that it can be reaffirmed in Crane’s own terms.
CHAPTER 2

“A PLACE FORMERLY UNSUSPECTED”: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THE DISCOVERY OF CULTURE IN IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN AND PATERSON

“No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since the world it opens is always a place formerly unsuspected.” —Paterson, Book II, 1948

I.

William Carlos Williams’s facetious comment about being “at heart a mystic” suggests the difficult and often elusive task that he and other poets faced while trying to conceptualize and enact a truly “modern” poetry. For Williams, finding a poetry that would arise from the uniquely modern conditions of experience both in its form and content was a lifelong process, and one that would not offer any fixed or final solution. The great challenge of such a project not surprisingly inspires a playful wish on Williams’s part for mystical insight, for a transcendent moment of understanding that would unmistakably validate his poetic approach. The terms that Williams uses suggest
an elusiveness to the understanding he seeks: “the strange phosphorus”\(^1\) in *In the American Grain*, or “a place / formerly / unsuspected” in *Paterson* (P 78). Such qualities seem difficult to discover and comprehend, particularly in a deliberate, programmatic fashion. In fact, Williams believes that this challenge is exactly what Eliot and Pound have avoided by fleeing America for Europe and allying their works with the established European tradition. The following quotation that I cited in the Introduction bears repeating: “I have maintained from the first that Eliot and Pound by virtue of their hypersensitivity (which is their greatness) were too quick to find a culture (the English continental) ready made for their assertions. They ran from something else, something cruder but, at the same time, newer, more dangerous but heavy with rewards for the sensibility that could reap them.” Williams’s terms here are instructive: Eliot and Pound already had their established “assertions,” and then sought the “culture” that could affirm them. An emphasis on local culture presents greater rewards for poetry, but only if a poet is able to “reap them,” which seems to be slightly in question.

This elusiveness of a conceptual ideal—in terms of a modernist poetics, or the meaningfulness that can be found in one’s local cultural conditions—pervades Williams’s work, but this work rarely gives the sense that a fixed solution lies at the endpoint of William’s grappling with these challenges. At times Williams’s writings suggest that the process of seeking these ideals can become the paramount concern. Yet he also frequently emphasizes the significance of what can be found by adhering to these processes: although the ideal may never be articulated with finality, something approximating an ideal can be expressed, if not specifically quantified.\(^2\) In a section from *The Embodiment of Knowledge* entitled “The Importance of Place,” Williams explicitly
addresses one means of approaching “[t]he character area of myths, of which the past of human history consists—and upon which rests all his later knowledge” (EK 131). Williams asserts that “a palpable mode” for approaching the “beginning” of knowledge exists, “and that [mode] is place” (EK 131). He goes on: “This is the mode by which all the prelogical is made known to us, the unknowable, the ‘beginnings’ of whatever it may be” (EK 131).

Williams’s assertion of the possibility of “place” is reminiscent of his repeated interests in his local cultural conditions as the proper subject for poetry. But this emphasis on place still does not guarantee a solution to the formal and thematic aims in Williams’s work; it remains a “mode” that can allow the poet a way into “the unknowable,” “whatever it may be.” Thus, place becomes the way to approach knowledge, but it is unclear as to whether this focus on place will in and of itself provide a satisfactory understanding. Williams most explicitly searches for knowledge through the “mode” of place in the prose work In the American Grain, published in 1925, and the epic poem Paterson, whose first book was published in 1946 (although, as I mentioned earlier, Williams locates the beginning of Paterson as prior to 1927). After the explorations of various American locations in In the American Grain, Williams moves in Paterson toward a more specific, localized focus on the town of Paterson, New Jersey. Williams’s poem always had as an antagonist Eliot’s The Waste Land, that “great catastrophe to our letters,” but as Williams developed the poem he also began to see this work as responding to Pound’s Cantos as well. Thus, Paterson can be located within the
modernist efforts to write a cultural epic, along with Crane’s *The Bridge*, Pound’s *Cantos*, and to a lesser extent Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, as well as the later effort of Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*.

As an attempt at a cultural epic, or what Michael Bernstein calls a “modern verse epic,” *Paterson* enters a poetic register with a different set of expectations than Williams’s earlier avant-garde works, his shorter lyrics, or the prose work of *In the American Grain*. Bernstein specifically discusses *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, and *The Maximus Poems* as examples of this “modern verse epic”; he also considers the expectations for such works to be instructive to their culture, to present “a narrative of its audience’s own cultural, historical, or mythic heritage, providing models of exemplary conduct (both good and bad) by which its readers can regulate their lives and adjust their shared customs” (14). Further, “[t]he element of instruction […] is deliberately foregrounded in an epic which offers its audience lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival” (14).

This element of *Paterson*, its “instructive” or “exemplary” component as a cultural epic, becomes difficult to reconcile with Williams’s persistent awareness of the elusiveness of fixed resolutions in his struggles toward a modernist poetics. This instructive imperative calls for a clarity and accessibility that would allow *Paterson* to reach a broader audience that would presumably benefit from what the poem has to say. It also implies that the author must have something approaching fixed answers, or at least comprehensive ideas, for dealing with the challenges of his cultural moment. The difficult nature of Pound’s epic, as well as its declining appeal to the wide audience that Pound envisioned for it, would likely have made Williams more conscious of the
challenge of reconciling the difficulty of his modernist poetics with the clarity that would help *Paterson* to reach those for whom it is intended. One might be inclined to suggest that the emphasis on *process* in Williams’s work constitutes an “exemplary” approach to the challenges facing his cultural moment; that is, the poem would demonstrate Williams putting a particular method into practice that others could imitate. But such a strategy seems at least incongruous, if not directly incompatible, with the poem’s goal of providing some kind of instruction for its audience. If this kind of epic functions to some degree as a corrective for its audience, then showing them *how* they can begin a process to figure out what to do, instead of showing them specifically *what* to do, or *what* results they can achieve, seems inadequate to the task that the poem has taken on. Why, after all, would anyone follow a method for understanding and improving their culture if Williams cannot offer the results to prove his method’s efficacy? In *Paterson* Williams struggles with this challenge of reconciling the corrective aim of his epic with the elusiveness of any fixed solutions in what he believed to be his truly modernist poetics, with his efforts “applied no way else than locally to particulars.”

II.

To discuss the aim of *Paterson* in terms of *how* it seeks cultural understanding and of *what* that understanding might consist suggests the traditional distinction made between literary form and content. This distinction figures prominently in Williams’s work, as he frequently emphasizes the formal component of his developing modernist poetics. This emphasis is particularly prominent in Williams’s early avant-garde writings, such as *Kora in Hell* (1920) and *Spring and All* (1923), which in general privilege the
literary work as an imaginative construct dependent on its own interrelations over the
work’s ability to arise from and reflect its contemporary cultural conditions."Yet during
the early twenties Williams was also working on In the American Grain, a work
intimately concerned with the content of American history. And in a letter from 1932,
Williams affirms the importance of what a poem says and how it reflects the context from
which it arises: “As I have said, for me, [poetry’s] virtue lies in relating to the immediacy
of my life. I live where I live and acknowledge no lack of opportunity because of that to
be alert to facts, to the music of events, of words, of the speech of people about me” (SL
131). Yet Williams’s articulations of a truly modernist poetics consistently emphasize the
necessity of innovations in poetic form. In the same letter in which he criticizes Eliot and
Pound’s preference for “ready made assertions,” Williams also addresses the search for a
poetry that can be reflective of its culture: “our chief occupation as artists, singly and
jointly, should be the clarification of form, new alignments, in our own language and
culture” (SL 226). Williams goes on: “This is why the question of FORM is so important
and merits such devotion and the keenest of wits, because it is the very matter itself of a
culture” (SL 227). Yet in the same letter Williams is unable to neglect fully the
importance of the poem’s content and asserts the decidedly modernist impulse to see
form and content as inextricably linked: “So that both Pound and Eliot have slipped back,
intellectually, from their early promise. Which is to say that the form and the gist, the
very meat, of a new cultural understanding are interlinked inseparably” (SL 227).4

Williams’s desire to conflate “the form and the gist” in his search for “a new
cultural understanding” can also be seen in “The Important of Place” and the “mode” of
place that Williams describes. The very idea of a “mode” suggests a method for
approaching what is unknown, a formal strategy concerned primarily with how knowledge can be achieved rather than of what that knowledge consists. For example, Williams describes his sense of place in the following terms: “There is a certain position of the understanding anterior to all systems of thought, as well as of fact and of deed—that is common to all: it is that in which the thinker places himself on the near side of reality—abjures the unknowable and begins within a certain tacitly limited field of human possibility to seek wisdom” (EK 132). Here Williams’s sense of place serves as a “position” or orientation toward “the unknowable,” which will hopefully lead toward “wisdom” or understanding of what lies just beyond that original positioning. Place, in this instance, serves only as a starting point. But later Williams discusses what will be observed from this “position”: “First rely on the direct observation of the senses, of such strength everything else is built up, without it nothing is reliable. Judge by the eyes and ears, touch and taste—reject everything from no matter what source that is without place there” (EK 135). This final phrase, “without place there,” suggests the importance and integrity of the “position” itself, rather than to what it might lead. Williams grounds this notion of the place itself in the concrete, focusing on “direct observation,” “the eyes and ears, touch and taste.” Thus, Williams envisions place as both a methodological imperative—a starting point for the pursuit of “wisdom”—as well as an essential entity that must be known in and of itself, with this knowledge arising from an attention to its concrete details.

Williams’s latter sense of place, as object rather than method, seems like an addendum to the earlier methodological scheme that is this essay’s primary focus. A reason for this latter notion may be to address the persistent references to what is
“unknown” or even “unknowable” when discussing the earlier sense of place. Williams tries to fight off “despair” when considering this vast blank, but its quality of being “outside of deduction, and unscalable by reason” suggests an inscrutability that will surely be difficult to overcome (EK 131). To focus on the results of “direct observation” from the “place there” offers a substantiality to counter the seemingly “unscalable” “unknown.”

Of course, the emphasis on place as object is certainly in keeping with much of Williams’s thinking on the importance of materiality in poetry—“No ideas but in things” (P 6) from Paterson, or the focus on the materiality of words and texts in his avant-garde writings—so it does not constitute a radical new direction or a negation of what Williams had previously espoused. However, it does suggest a desire for what is immediate and concrete, even for what is simply available, in relation to the grand ambitions that Williams consistently asserts for his work. Williams’s critical comments of Eliot and Pound that I cited earlier suggest this sense of great difficulty for the approach that Williams has chosen and to which he at times struggles to adhere. Eliot and Pound were able “to find a culture […] ready made for their assertions,” which leads to answers incompatible with a local American experience. Yet Williams’s need to constantly challenge the success of his two contemporaries shows that at least others have found these “ready made” answers appealing. Williams will maintain his own project, in which the answers may present themselves to one who “could reap them” (italics mine). Yet the struggle to sustain the “crude” and “dangerous” method against the traditionally validated method whose answers are “ready made” begins to seem more challenging and potentially discouraging than Williams’s enthusiasm makes it seem.
Williams further discusses this struggle with the elusiveness of fixed resolutions in his essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” (originally given as a lecture in 1948). Williams calls for “sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure” in order “to liberate the possibilities of depicting reality in a modern world” (SE 281, 284). He also articulates the values he associates with the “field of action”—“profusion, the Mass—heterogeneous—ill-assorted—quite breathless—grasping at all kinds of things”—and contrasts them, not surprisingly, with Eliot’s poetry, in which Eliot chooses “to go where there was already a mass of more ready distinction […] already an established literature” (SE 284-5). Williams describes Eliot and those sympathetic to his position as “extractors of genius,” who must be “valued” for what they do. But Williams and those who follow him “are in a different phase—a new language—we are making the mass in which some later Eliot will dig. We must see our opportunity and increase the hoard others will find to use. We must find our pride in that. We must have the pride, the humility, and the thrill in the making” (SE 285). Again, the terms that Williams employs do not suggest any certainty in this method being employed: only an “ill-assorted” “profusion” will be the result of this “grasping at all kinds of things.” Williams tries to muster his resolve and the resolve of those who practice this method to “find our pride in that,” in “increasing] the hoard others will find to use.” But the results for those working in “the field of action” now are uncertain at best, and Williams explicitly acknowledges that the essential breakthroughs from this work will be deferred until they are discovered by others.

Literary history may have proven Williams correct, but his conception of “the field of action” seems unusual, given that this lecture originally took place during the
same year as the publication of Paterson, Book II. Williams is acknowledging that his
search for the proper method, the proper conception of “the poetic structure,” remains
ongoing and cannot help “to liberate the possibilities of depicting reality in a modern
world” in any substantial way; instead it will best serve by pointing the way toward
further possible developments. As I mentioned before, this emphasis on process may be
valuable to Williams’s struggle to find a truly modernist poetics, and his sense that this
work will yield its greatest results in the future innovations that it will inspire is not
incompatible with his avant-garde background. Yet Williams’s conception of a poetic
“field of action” conflicts with the imperatives for writing a cultural epic with which
Williams necessarily must engage in Paterson—specifically that the poem must offer
some instruction for its audience and some correction for the problems that plague its
cultural moment. To suggest that the poem will offer an “ill-assorted” “profusion” “in
which some later Eliot will dig” for its true meaning falls short of the expectations for
such a work.

III.

Before turning to Paterson, however, I would like to examine In the American
Grain, for this earlier engagement with American cultural history reveals several crucial
issues that will come into play in Paterson. Williams’s contention that he had begun to
conceive of Paterson some time before 1927 also suggests some continuity between these
two works that their actual dates of publication (1925 for In the American Grain; 1946
for Book I of Paterson) may belie. Williams places a brief summary of In the American
Grain on its first page, in which he attempts to encapsulate his historical method for the
book. His first statement aligns him against the residues of traditional historical
discourse: “In these studies I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of
borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid”
(IAG v). From this perspective the “established literature” becomes an impediment to
knowledge, not the means by which it is achieved. Instead of an illuminating account of
“true” meaning or insight, history has become a “chaotic,” self-reflexive activity. Later in
this summation Williams “re-names” this “true character [that] lies hid”: “…it has been
my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life,
nameless under an old misappellation” (IAG v). This notion of a “strange phosphorus”
qualifies the possibility of a stable, fixed meaning (a “true character”) residing in the
sources that have contributed to Williams’s contemporary culture; it suggests something
luminous and mysterious, potentially resistant to typical means of knowing (including
Williams’s method of investigation). Williams also describes this “strange phosphorous”
as “nameless,” suggesting that his project is more than just a matter of “re-naming”
correctly, as he first asserts in this statement. It is also an effort to discover this
mysterious potential, even though it may lie beyond (or underneath) the realm of
traditional discourse.

Many instances in In the American Grain reveal Williams engaging in a fairly
traditional approach of direct study of historical sources to perceive their value, most
explicitly in his extensive use of original source materials from Christopher Columbus,
Cotton Mather, and others. But in other instances In the American Grain reveals an
impulse in Williams to move away from metaphors of recovery (like Eliot digging in “a
mass of more ready distinction”) toward a conception that allows more active
engagement with the process that can determine history’s “true character.” For example, in the chapter “Père Sebastian Rasles,” Williams describes a six-week trip to Paris that allowed him to visit with many of the important literary and artistic figures of the time, including American expatriate friends such as Gertrude Stein, H. D., and Ezra Pound. Williams feels alienated from this cosmopolitan crowd, and his reaction positions him against these artists who he believes to be congregating in Paris because of its tradition as a center of cultural history: “I felt myself with ardors not released but beaten back, in this center of old-world culture” (IAG 105).

Williams rejects the appeal to tradition inherent in residing in Paris, but he does have a fruitful visit with a French writer who wishes to discuss American history with him (their discussion makes up the bulk of this chapter). Much of their exchange focuses on America’s Puritan legacy, with the Frenchman, Valéry Larbaud, admiring the Puritans for their austerity and ability to persist in the New World, and Williams arguing for the continuing damage that this legacy does to contemporary America. Williams’s initial complaint is against the general ignorance of Americans toward their history and how it shapes their present lives: “It is an extraordinary phenomenon that Americans have lost the sense, being made up as we are, that what we are has its origins in what the nation in the past has been; that there is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do” (IAG 109). This observation suggests a fairly traditional notion of historical value on Williams’s part—the past as a necessary component of the present. But Williams and Larbaud begin to disagree as to what exactly that Puritan legacy is; Larbaud describes it
as such: “By the strength of religion alone, they surmounted all difficulties in which
science has degraded us again today; all things they explain, with clarity and
distinction…There is vigor there—and by that, a beauty” (IAG 110).

Larbaud, in essence, wishes to take the Puritans at their word (and at the word of
most accounts of American history), as hearty settlers fighting against the wilds of an
inhospitable land. Williams, however, believes that such an interpretation, despite its
popularity, misses the “true character” of this legacy, with “its rigid clarity, its inhuman
clarity” (IAG 111), which Williams later calls an “abortion of the mind, this purity” (IAG
112). Williams seeks to separate “the rugged English pioneers” from the “theoretic
dogma that clung to them unevenly,” considering this Puritanical “dogma” “an
immorality that IS America…I wish to drag this THING out by itself to annihilate it”
(IAG 114-5). These statements begin to reveal Williams’s desire to interrogate the
process of historical transmission that has intertwined the pioneers with their
“dogma”—Williams implies that the process involved is arbitrary and ideological, and as
such, one he could engage with and possibly reconstitute.

Williams’s and Larbaud’s dialogue continues:

This THING, strange, inhuman, powerful, is like a relic
of some died out tribe whose practices were revolting.—
But the relic will be beautiful, he answered, sometimes. I
have enjoyed the books.
Against his view I continually protested. I cannot separate
myself, I said, from this ghostly miasm. It grips me. I cannot
merely talk of books, just of Mather as if he were some pearl.
(IAG 115)

Williams continues to distinguish his conception of history from its conventional scheme
of dead “relics” and “books” whose meaning has been fixed by the tradition that has
developed. To Williams, these Puritan sources are vital and real, affecting the lives of Americans directly, whether they acknowledge it or not. But Williams’s use of the term “ghostly miasm” also suggests a more elusive and mysterious element to this process by which these sources affect the present. The immediacy and vitality of these sources implies that these still-living historical sources can be altered, or even destroyed, if necessary; yet the “ghostly miasm” seems more elusive and possibly resistant to attempts to reconstitute its importance through an engagement with the traditional discourse that has shaped history.

Williams continues this line of inquiry:

I speak only of sources. I wish only to disentangle the obscurities that oppress me, to track them to the root and to uproot them—

Continue, he said. Adding with a smile, You wish to uproot history, like those young men of the Sorbonne.

No, I seek the support of history but I wish to understand it aright, to make it SHOW itself. (IAG 116)

This desire “to make [history] SHOW itself” suggests that history possesses an essence, or “strange phosphorus,” that may be revealed only after great effort. But this statement also significantly revises the terms of Williams’s project: the agency for revealing the “strange phosphorus” now seems to lie with history. Williams want to make history “SHOW itself,” but this passage suggests that history may have a mind of its own and may refuse to “SHOW itself,” thus leaving the essence that Williams seeks inaccessible. This “strange phosphorus” may ultimately remain inscrutable, but the initial challenge lies in forcing history to reveal it.

To counter this elusiveness in America’s puritanical heritage, Williams begins to argue for the historical importance of the French Jesuit priest, Père Sebastian Rasles, and
the French influence in northern New England, which Williams posits as a counterpoint to the intense Protestantism practiced to the south. Stuck between these competing influences were the American Indians, and Williams believes their position analogous to that of Williams’s contemporary Americans, struggling between essentially repressive and liberating influences. Williams’s discussion of Rasles begins to suggest that the apprehension of this “true character” in history depends less on recovering it and more on the active engagement with what the historical process has come to privilege. Larbaud is initially skeptical of both the importance of this Catholic influence and Williams’s interpretation of it:

And you want to make Americans see that, you want to make them comprehend this generous spirit, as you call it? Well, come to France and make us understand it.—He laughed.

(It is the quality of this impact on the native phase that is the moral source I speak of, one of the sources that has shaped America and must be recognized.) (IAG 122)

That Williams includes his response to Larbaud’s skepticism parenthetically, before proceeding with his narrative, reveals an uncertainty on Williams’s part that his goal is fully achievable, at least to one inclined to view history traditionally like Larbaud. After all, if this source has not been “recognized” in previous accounts of American history, one wonders how much of an “impact” it truly has had on the culture—a subtle influence could certainly be possible, but from Larbaud’s perspective one can also reasonably expect broad cultural recognition to be a prerequisite for an historical “source” to have an extensive “impact” that could rival the widely acknowledged influence of America’s Puritan heritage. Williams’s concern about the impact of this source and the willingness of Americans to accept it as an essential part of their history foregrounds the question of
audience and reception. To have this French Catholic component of American culture “recognized,” Williams must necessarily be able to convince his contemporaries that this influence has persisted over time.

Later in their conversation, when Williams argues that these struggles between Catholic and Protestant values “have a great importance for the student of today,” Larbaud responds: “They are remote,” to which Williams replies: “One should read the *Lettres Édifiantes* [of Rasles], I think one would understand better how much we are like the Indians and how nicely Catholicism fits us” (*IAG* 128). Williams is unable to mount an argument to counter Larbaud’s claim of “remoteness”; instead he slips into an almost Poundian voice, advocating for the necessity of reading this source material to discover how “nicely” it “fits” contemporary America. Williams struggles to make the argument on his own and turns the task back to those whom he is trying to convince, sending them back to the source material that Williams has already studied. The context of Williams’s conversation highlights the difficulty of reaching his necessary audience: here is an awkward American visitor in “this center of old-world culture,” discussing these questions of American history with an inquisitive French author, but apparently unable to engage his American counterparts—e.g., Pound, Stein, or H. D.—in similar discussions, their interests lying outside of contemporary America.

Williams finds further cause for concern about American culture in its loss of immediacy in all facets of life. In the chapter “Jacataqua,” Williams discusses the “force” that has accelerated the harvesting and marketing of wheat, not as technological advance but as detriment: “That force is fear that robs the emotions; a mechanism to increase the gap between touch and thing, *not* to have contact” (*IAG* 177). Williams would expect
such lack of touch and contact within the universities, but he sees this condition
spreading: “Nothing noticed. Nothing taught in the academies. You’d think that THAT
would force us into some immediacy. NEVER…Our life drives us apart and forces us
upon science and invention—away from touch. Or if we do touch, our breed knows no
better than the course fiber of football” (IAG 179). Here Williams identifies the typical
culprits, “the academies” and “science,” pillars of the deadening abstractions of
established thought. But the lack of contact expected from these institutions has taken
root throughout the culture.

Williams’s response to this situation, as in “The Importance of Place,” involves a
heightened focus on one’s immediate location in its most concrete details. And like Crane
in The Bridge, Williams associates this focus on the local with the cultural heritage of the
American Indians, for both Crane and Williams perceive the native Americans as
possessing a more natural, intimate knowledge of the land upon which they live. Crane
and Williams’s interest in this intimate knowledge does not manifest itself as any
extensive investigation of native American history or culture, but rather as a way of
reconstituting their own relationships to the accumulations of culture in the modern era,
particularly the deadening impact of European cultural traditions. This process is
particularly evident in In the American Grain, as Williams posits a direct lineage with the
American Indian but ultimately concerns himself with the way that this heritage can
usefully be absorbed by the European settler. An early chapter concerning Juan Ponce de
Leon begins by asserting modern Americans’ connection with, and difference from, their
Indian forebears: “History, history! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins
for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery. No, we are not Indians but we
are men of their world. The blood means nothing; the spirit, the ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood” (39). The chapter that follows describes de Soto’s explorations into the American continent and his men’s struggles against the land and the native Americans. Williams casts de Soto and his men as moving toward an intimate embrace with the American soil, cast female, and as they make this progression de Soto and his men becomes more “like an Indian” (*IAG* 52), leaving behind the traces of their European lives.

But later in *In the American Grain*’s historical chronology Williams finds in Sam Houston a character whose exemplary interactions with Indian culture are most instructive to Williams’s contemporary situation. Houston first lived with the Cherokee Indians of Tennessee during his teens and later became governor of Tennessee. But after a sudden separation from his wife Houston left Tennessee to rejoin the Cherokee, now living in Arkansas, and stayed with them for eleven more years before reemerging as a heroic military and political figure in Texas. Williams admires Houston’s ability to “descend” to “the ground” in his life with the Cherokee, or to know the details of his specific locale: “He wants to have the feet of his understanding on the ground, his ground, the ground, the only ground that he knows, that which *is* under his feet” (*IAG* 213). Thus, Houston is able to know the Cherokee culture directly and intimately, yet what Williams most admires is Houston’s ability to take what he learns from the Cherokee and employ it within the dominant American culture (just as Crane sought to refigure what he perceived as the immediacy of Indian life and make it compatible with
his own experience as homosexual poet in the modern era). Like Houston, Williams wishes to take this lesson of “descending” to “the ground” and apply it to his own context as modern American poet.

The poet that Williams believes best represents this ethos of “descent” is Edgar Allan Poe, who is the subject of the next to last chapter in *In the American Grain*. Williams identifies two “local causes” that shaped Poe’s genius, and these two causes are reminiscent of the terms that Williams would later use in “The Importance of Place.” The first cause was “the necessity for a fresh beginning, backed by a native vigor of extraordinary proportions,” which led to “innumerable timeless insights resulting, by his genius, in firm statements on the character of form” (*IAG* 219). The second cause was “the immediate effect of the locality upon the first [cause], upon his nascent impulses, upon his original thrusts” (*IAG* 219). Thus, Williams distinguishes between, on one hand, Poe’s drive for formal innovation and, on the other hand, the effect that the immediacy of his locale has upon this first desire; in essence, the drive for formal innovation, if successful, will not be distinct from the immediate conditions of one’s locality. Later Williams expands upon this idea: “What [Poe] says, being thoroughly local in origin, has some chance of being universal in application, a thing they never dared conceive. Made to fit a *place* it will have that actual quality of *things* anti-metaphysical” (*IAG* 222). Poe’s work may achieve some “universal” quality, but what clearly matters most to Williams is its ability to find “the actual quality of *things*” that results from an attention to “place.”

Yet an uncertainty of what can be found through this attention to place creeps into Williams’s discussion of Poe, as the certainty of “*things* anti-metaphysical” is complicated. Williams claims that “[t]he language of [Poe’s] essays is a remarkable
HISTORY of the locality he springs from. There is no aroma to his words, rather a luminosity, that comes of a disassociation from anything else than thought and ideals” (IAG 223-4). This “luminosity” may not be a detriment, and may in fact suggest a desirable clarity; yet the “disassociation” of the language “from anything else” contrasts sharply with “that actual quality of things.” Near the end of this chapter Williams again subtly alludes to an elusive quality in Poe’s writings: “It is in this wraithlike quality of his poems […] that Poe is most of the very ground, hard to find, as if we walked upon a cushion of light pressed thin beneath our feet” (IAG 233). Williams’s terms oscillate between something inscrutable—“wraithlike,” “hard to find”—and the stability of “the very ground.” The “cushion of light” seems uncertain as well: is it an illuminating light, or is it a barrier between us and the ground that will be the basis of our understanding? These potentially contradictory terms are not necessarily a fault in Williams’s discussion, and in a work such as In the American Grain they help to reveal the richness of concepts and sources that inform America’s cultural history. When Williams turns to Paterson, however, and the project of writing a cultural epic, the context changes, and the potential contradictions in terms becomes more difficult to reconcile with the instructive imperative of his epic.

IV.

Williams begins the chapter of his Autobiography that discusses Paterson with this observation: “Even though the greatest boon a poet grants the world is to reveal that secret and sacred presence, they will not know what he is talking about” (A 390). This statement is oddly placed at the beginning of Williams’s discussion of Paterson and
again highlights the concern of conveying knowledge, or “that secret and sacred presence,” to an audience that may benefit from it. Williams goes on to elaborate about his approach toward the poem: “[Paterson] called for a poetry such as I did not know, it was my duty to discover or make such a context on the ‘thought.’ To make a poem, fulfilling the requirements of the art, and yet new, in the sense that in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect” (A 392). This sense of the poem as an act of discovery, or a process that would ultimately lead toward insight, sounds similar to Williams’s notion that the poem would “follow […] the course of the river” (P xiii), the Passaic River that runs through the city of Paterson and figures prominently in the poem. Both conceptions of the poem suggest a progression toward some kind of insight or understanding. But when this insight will be observable or quantifiable remains in question; and if the insight is deferred until the end, how will the rest of the poem inform and inspire its audience? In a way these descriptions seem compatible with Williams’s “field of action” strategy. When considered in its most basic terms, this notion of “the poem as a field of action” best illustrates what it resists: the inclination to seek a pre-existing order to give coherence to the confusions and contradictions inherent in lived experience. But when we turn to what this concept affirms, the terms become more vague: the diverse materials and sources that constitute our reality must be accepted as is, as the flux that necessarily constitutes our experience. To oversimplify, Williams is almost suggesting that we include everything and leave the sorting for another time, as well as the means of finding insight or understanding within the poem.
Williams begins Book One of *Paterson* by describing the city of Paterson as a man lying in the Passaic River Valley, with the falls of the river placed near his head and representing his myriad thoughts:

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He
lies on his right side, head near the thunder
of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,
his dreams walk about the city where he persists
incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.
Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his
machinations
drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river
animate a thousand automatons. (*P* 6)

A little later in this section Williams continues to draw this connection between the waters of the falls and the thoughts of Paterson (the city): “Jostled as are the waters approaching / the brinks, his thoughts / interlace, repel and cut under” (*P* 7). This intermingling continues as the waters head over the falls:

Retake later the advance and
are replaced by succeeding hordes
pushing forward—they coalesce now
glass-smooth with their swiftness,
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close
they leap to the conclusion and
fall, fall in air! as if
floating, relieved of their weight,
split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk
with the catastrophe of the descent
floating unsupported
to hit the rocks: to a thunder,
as if lightning had struck

All lightness lost, weight regained in
the repulse, a fury of
escape driving them to rebound
upon those coming after […] (*P* 8)
At this point Williams is already making the crucial analogy of the man as a city, which suggests that these thoughts he has represent the ideas of the city, or the many sources and events that contribute to its sense of identity, its sense of itself as a city. By portraying these thoughts as the jostled, flailing, confused waters going over the falls, Williams already taps into the idea of the “ill-assorted” and “heterogeneous” “profusion.” But even in these early passages is a note of error: Williams describes Paterson as an “incognito” influence in the town because its residents, the “thousand automatons,” do not “know their sources” (P 6)—that is, they do not realize that their identities are formed by the place in which they live, thus rendering them as meaningless “automatons.” As Williams continues to describe the interactions between Paterson’s “thoughts” and the city’s inhabitants, the sense of disconnection grows. Like the “thoughts” bandied about by the falls, those that should be reaching the people of the city tumble irregularly and miss their mark: “Inside the bus one sees / his thoughts sitting and standing. His / thoughts alight and scatter” (P 9). The residents “walk incommunicado” (P 10), unable to connect with and comprehend the “thoughts” of the city. Williams is clear about the reason for this lack of comprehension: “The language, the language / fails them / They do not know the words” (P 11). Williams continues: “They may look at the torrent in / their minds / and it is foreign to them”; “…the language / is divorced from their minds, / the language . . . the language!” (P 12). Thus, the “profusion” of the falls as expression of the “thoughts” of the city presents a challenge in connecting with those to whom it offers the most value: the residents of Paterson who could understand the causes of, and perhaps extract some meaning for, the lives that they lead.
The similarities between the roar of the falls and the “profusion” of Williams’s “field of action” suggest an analogous function between the “thoughts” of Paterson and the poem itself. Williams, too, presents at times a jostled mix of thoughts and ideas to his readers, which offers a key to understanding the process that creates a sense of culture, but which also raise the specter of falling on uncomprehending ears, leaving his readers “incommunicado.”

These “thoughts” of Paterson that can be heard, but are rarely understood properly, consist of various historical and cultural sources from the long history of the city of Paterson, typically extracted from history books about the city and the region. These excerpts are typically included without introductory materials or standard transitions, suggesting a “heterogeneous” “profusion” that is allowed to stand without explicit interpretive connections. Thus, the inclusion of these facts from the city’s cultural history initially appears disorganized and arbitrary, yet they do reveal certain thematic commonalities. For example, several of these historical excerpts in the first section of Book I highlight the diverse, and at times “ill-assorted,” events and peoples that contribute to the city’s cultural history (or at least the version of that history that Williams wishes to put forth). For example, one selection describes a physically deformed young man visited by George Washington during his visit to Paterson; another includes statistical information about the diverse backgrounds of the city’s inhabitants as seen by Alexander Hamilton; yet another recounts the formation of “Jackson’s Whites,” a group of social outcasts consisting of displaced Tuscaroras Indians, “Hessian deserters from the British Army, a number of albinos among them, escaped negro slaves and a lot of women and their brats released in New York City after the British had been forced to
leave” (P 12), who congregated in “Upper New York” during the colonial era. The inclusion of these emphatically “heterogeneous” groups and individuals suggests the great “profusion” that must contribute to a full knowledge of a place’s cultural character, whether it be Paterson or, more broadly, colonial America, even if such sources have been omitted from traditional historical accounts.

Similarly, this section of Paterson includes the introduction of two characters who recur throughout the poem, Sarah Cumming and Sam Patch (P 14-6). Cumming visited the falls in 1812 with her husband, the Reverend Hooper Cumming. After ascending to a viewpoint to overlook the falls, Mrs. Cumming slipped and fell over the ledge at a moment when her husband had briefly looked away. Her body was found in the river the next day. Sam Patch was on hand when the people of Paterson were attempting to secure a bridge across the falls. When a piece of the apparatus fell, Patch quickly dove down into the water to retrieve it. He went on to become somewhat of a national celebrity, diving over falls across the country. However, in an attempt to dive over the falls of the Genesee River in western New York in 1829, Patch was killed by the fall. These two figures become symbolic of the attempt to negotiate “the catastrophe of the descent” over the falls and comprehend the jostled and confused “roar” of Paterson’s thoughts, “a / language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without / dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear” (P 15).

Yet, amid these struggles to find an audience that could possibly comprehend and find meaning in this “profusion” of details, Williams does suggest the possibility of extracting some sense of clarity from these conditions. This potential clarity resides in
what Williams describes as “an assonance, a homologue / triple piled / pulling the
disparate together to clarify and compress” (P 19). Williams then introduces a specific
image that attempts to resist the flux of the falls:

On the embankment a short,
compact cone (juniper)
that trembles frantically
in the indifferent gale: male—stands
rooted there . (P 19)

Williams offers another image, similar to the juniper cone, a branch that attempts to stand
fast amid the “catastrophe” of the falls:

one branch
of the tree at the fall’s edge, one
mottled branch, withheld,
among the gyrate branches
of the waist-thick sycamore,
sway less, among the rest, separate, slowly
with giraffish awkwardness, slightly
on a long axis, so slightly
as hardly to be noticed, in itself the tempest (P 20)

Williams then connects these images with one he had introduced previously, in Book
One’s first section—that of the first of nine wives of an African chief, from a picture
Williams saw in National Geographic. Williams admired the strength and stability of this
woman: “the last, the first wife, / present! supporting all the rest growing / up from her”
(P 13). After his description of the “mottled branch,” Williams reintroduces “the first
wife,” ascribing her also with “giraffish awkwardness” (P 20).

This collection of images, the “compact cone,” the “mottled branch,” and the
“first wife,” with their traits of stability amid the flux of their environments, suggest a
potential to bring “the disparate together to clarify / and compress.” But Williams assigns
the first two images a significant location outside of the “tempest” and “catastrophe” of the falls. Williams also assigns a sense of origin, of preceding the “profusion” that threatens them, to this association of images:

Which is to say, though it be poorly said, there is a first wife
and a first beauty, complex, ovate—
the woody sepals standing back under
the stress to hold it there, innate

a flower within a flower whose history
(within the mind) crouching
among the ferny rocks, laughs at the names
by which they think to trap it. Escapes! (P 21-2)

The sense of originality of these images, of being “first” of their kind, creates a difficulty for any attempt to characterize (and thus contain) them. A true understanding of their significance will likely remain elusive, which only reinforces the sense that these few sources of meaning, with their abilities “to clarify and compress,” are unlikely to be perceived and understood.

This notion that such images are elusive and prone to “escape” “the names by which they think to trap it” may offer a valuable resistance to those schemes that attempt to fit the unique conditions of experience into a pre-existing, traditional framework. Yet this elusiveness also suggests a similarly problematic situation for Williams’s own efforts to convey the insights of his experience to an audience. His more open and inclusive concept of “the field of action” may potentially be more responsive to the significance of these fleeting and elusive images. But Williams’s ability to fully convey this significance seems likely to be beyond his grasp as well, for his essential project in Paterson, in writing a cultural epic, is “to name” his experience for the benefit of others.
Toward the end of Book I Williams feels the inevitable pull toward simpler and perhaps immediately more satisfying solutions. He “envies” those that have “run off / toward the peripheries— / to other centers, direct— / for clarity” (P 35), a likely allusion to fellow Americans like Eliot and Pound who had gone to Europe seeking the centered “clarity” of an “old-world culture.” Williams also draws attention to the destitute and enervated conditions that have resulted from the many years in which the city’s residents have failed to comprehend the meaning of the falls. This ongoing state of “divorce” perpetuates an inhospitable landscape: “Into the sewer they threw the dead horse. / What birth does this foretell?”; “Tenement windows, sharp edged, in which / no face is seen” (P 37). Williams ends Book I by emphasizing this note of divorce, describing “Thought” as “hidden from sun and sight…shut from / the world—and unknown to the world” (P 38-9). These desultory conditions that pervade both the city and its residents motivate Williams toward motion, toward the park on the outskirts of town in Book Two. After facing the challenge of communicating his insights to an audience in Book One, Williams in Book Two considers the potential for established concepts to infuse his experience with meaning. This book is titled “Sunday in the Park,” and in it Williams’s poetic persona, “Paterson,” or “Dr. P.,” leaves the confines of the city and walks to the park on Garret Mountain. According to the symbolic scheme established in the beginning of the poem, this excursion to the park represents a romantic act, for Dr. P. also serves as the persona of the masculine city, now visiting his female counterpart, “the Park / upon the rock, / female to the city” (P 43). In the park Dr. P. discovers many of the town’s other
citizens, often engaged in their own romantic encounters. The first section of Book Two considers this scene, the park on the mountain filled with lovers, and explores its potential to infuse meaning into the modern conditions of the town and its citizens.

In earlier drafts of this section Williams made explicit the connection between the scene in the park and an ancient love festival, or “Saturnalia” (Sankey 70). Williams establishes a contrast between this potential for a timeless significance in the passion of the townspeople and the vulgar realities of their modern lives. As Dr. Paterson ascends to the park, he acknowledges the parallels between his earlier desires in Book One (to “fall” “from the brink” in amorous union) and the actions of the people who are “pouring down! / For the flower of a day!” (P 44). The presence of the townspeople seems to engulf the park: “He hears! Voices . indeterminate! Sees them / moving, in groups, by twos and fours—filtering / off by way of the many bypaths” (P 45).

Before Dr. Paterson can move further into the park, however, he experiences a transcendent moment as he walks across a grass field:

When! from before his feet, half-tripping, picking a way, there starts .

— invisibly created (their jackets dust-grey) from the dust kindled to sudden ardor!

They fly away, churring! until their strength spent they plunge to the coarse cover again and disappear — but leave, livening the mind, a flashing of wings and a churring song . (P 47)

This sudden and unexpected event, a flight of grasshoppers, provides the narrator with a moment of heightened feeling and perception. As a result, Dr. Paterson remembers a
stone carving of a grasshopper that he had seen once before: “AND a grasshopper of red basalt, boot-long, / tumbles from the core of his mind” (P 47). Here the connection between life and art becomes highly charged, as the currency between the two appears to move reciprocally: the lived event brings back the experience of the aesthetic work, while the aesthetic work also adds a greater level of intensity to the actual experience. The remembrance of the stone carving also suggests the permanence available through art—“The stone lives, the flesh dies” (P 49)—which might offer a respite from the flux and profusion that has characterized the narrator’s encounters with the city of Paterson thus far.

This experience with the grasshoppers sets the tone for Dr. Paterson’s excursion into the park, raising expectations for a beneficially reciprocal relationship between the details of life and their aesthetic representation. In essence, the grasshoppers serve as a joyful introduction to what is to follow, full of the potential suggested by a celebration of love in the park: “couriers to the ceremonial of love! / —aflame in flight! / —aflame only in flight! / No flesh but the caress! / He is led forward by their announcing wings” (P 48). As Dr. Paterson enters the park, however, he quickly begins to qualify the potential for transformation that may exist among the amorous citizens:

    unless there is
    a new mind there cannot be a new
    line, the old will go on
    repeating itself with recurring
deadliness: without invention
nothing lies under the witch-hazel bush, the alder does not grow from among the hummocks (P 50)
Here Williams draws a distinction between novelty and repetition, with the “invention” of “a new mind” offering a contrast from the “recurring deadliness” of “the old.” The contention that the repetition of old forms can offer no life or vitality provides an important qualification to the value that can be found in the timelessness of traditional ideas, such as in the effort to draw a parallel between the current scene in the park and a classical saturnalia. Of course, Williams’s frequent criticisms of Eliot and Pound and their methods make clear that Williams would not be comfortable so closely imitating the method he relentlessly critiques. So here Williams attempts to modify the interaction between the present scene and a traditional framework: only with the novelty of “invention” can such a scene meaningfully echo any previous conceptual framework. But as Williams observes more of the people in the park we see that this newness and vitality is clearly lacking in their interactions. For example, he observes a young couple in secluded conversation:

Semi-naked, facing her, a sunshade over his eyes,
he talks with her

—the jalopy half hid
behind them in the trees—
I bought a new bathing suit, just

pants and a brassiere : the breast and
the pudenda covered—beneath

the sun in frank vulgarity.
Minds beaten thin
by waste—among

the working classes SOME sort of breakdown has occurred. Semi-roused
they lie upon their blanket
face to face,
mottled by the shadows of the leaves
upon them, unannoyed,
at least here unchallenged.
Not undignified. . . (P 51)

Williams’s characterization of this couple as “not undignified” feels like a token qualification of the malaise and enervation that so dominates their interactions; Williams even suggests their condition to be part of a larger societal decline, a “breakdown” among “the working classes.” Regardless of the potential causes, or their power to retain a modicum of dignity, this young couple represents a debasement of the potential suggested when Dr. Paterson entered the park, enlivened by the inherent beauty of the grasshoppers’ flight. Yet Dr. P. does recall this potential and still recognizes it around this couple, as they are “surrounded / by churring loves! Gay wings / to bear them” (P 52). Nonetheless, their “frank vulgarity” and “minds beaten thin by waste” offer no possibility of discovering any of the timeless meaning inherent in the act of love.

Dr. Paterson continues through the park toward the mountain’s summit, and he continues to hear the voices of the townspeople, “multiple and inarticulate . voices / clattering loudly to the sun, to / the clouds. Voices!” (P 54). Here the hint of a potential within these voices remains, a potential to ascend in praise of something greater than themselves. The possible connection between these townspeople and an older, established cultural tradition also remains redolent in the park, for better or worse: “It is this air! / the air of the Midi / and the old cultures intoxicates them” (P 57). But as Dr. P. reaches the summit of the park and observes more of the amorous townspeople, he finds a similarly vulgar, “semi-roused” couple:
She stirs, distraught,
against him—wounded (drunk), moves
against him (a lump) desiring,
against him, bored .
flagrantly bored and sleeping, a
beer bottle still grasped spear-like
in his hand . (P 58-9)

Again, as with the previous couple observed, these two are unable to achieve any of the potential meaningfulness that resides in the act of love. Instead of passion or joy, this couple only demonstrates boredom and drowsiness, particularly the “drunk” “lump” of a man whose lack of vitality is signified by the perverted phallic image he holds in his hand, “a beer bottle.” By the end of this first section of Book Two, Williams describes the people in the park as “the amnesic crowd” (P 60), which further discourages the potential for this scene to achieve some meaning in terms of the classical source of the saturnalia. The ignorance and forgetfulness of the crowd relegates their awareness to only the present scene—a scenario which Williams would typically find to be hopeful, with the townspeople’s attention not distracted by any broad traditional concepts and instead focused on the present conditions. Yet the townspeople that Dr. P. has found in the park do not even demonstrate any meaningful awareness of their local conditions; instead he finds them afflicted by listlessness and ignorance. The sense of beauty inherent in this locale, discovered by Dr. P. in the grasshoppers’ flight, presumably remains accessible to the people of Paterson—whether or not they will discover it, however, remains doubtful.

Yet this section of the poem does begin to answer that question, or at least begins to describe the terms important to the question, as it posits a particular kind of relationship between art and life, one that is more limited than that often invoked by Pound or Eliot. As Dr. P. journeys to the park, the kind of beauty he finds exists in a
sudden, unexpected encounter, and the integrity of this experience remains resistant to any larger schemes of meaning. Dr. P.’s experience does inspire a memory of a stone carving, which provides a heightened and sustained appreciation for the actual encounter with the grasshoppers. But neither the actual experience nor its aesthetic representation is able to subsume the integrity of the other term—they are each enriched by the other. By contrast, Williams’s awareness of the past existence of the classical love festival is unable to infuse the scene in the park with any meaning or beauty. Instead, this awareness only highlights the vulgarity of the present conditions of those townspeople in the park. Thus, the notion that these people could be transformed by, and absorbed into, the classical tradition of a saturnalia is too totalizing a metaphor for Williams, subscribing too fully to a previous scheme of meaning and offering too tidy a resolution. But Williams’s meaningful experience with the grasshopper resembles his experience of the “compact cone,” the “mottled branch,” and the “first wife” in Book One: these moments seem more personal and removed from Williams’s considerations of the sources that constitute Paterson’s cultural history. A moment of insight like the one with the grasshoppers may affirm Williams’s commitment to the specific local conditions found in the park. Yet when Williams tries to expand this insight to include the community of people he finds in the park his effort fails, which calls into question the readiness of these people for what Williams wishes to show them.

In the third section of Book Two, as Dr. P. begins his descent from the park, Williams considers this notion that the meaning of a place or event typically arises in a manner that resists categorization:
The descent beckons
    as the ascent beckoned
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment
    a sort of renewal
    even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
places
    inhabited by hordes
    heretofore unrealized,
of new kinds—
    since their movements
    are towards new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned)

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since
the world it opens is always a place
    formerly
    unsuspected. A
world lost,
    a world unsuspected
    beckons to new places
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
of whiteness . (P 78)

The power of “memory,” which Williams used in his encounter with the grasshoppers,
and an attention to immediate, concrete experience, create the possibility of discovering
something new and “unrealized,” or “a world unsuspected.” Such a discovery is
characterized by its novelty and unpredictability, thus challenging the power of previous
schemes of meaning (such as those provided by classical sources) to provide a
preexisting framework into which the specific details of experience may be absorbed.

But before Dr. P. leaves the park, he has another informative encounter in the
second section of Book Two—this time with a preacher (“a Protestant! protesting—as /
though the world were his own” [P 65]) espousing the values of religion to bolster life
with meaning. After his attempt to draw a parallel between the present and the classical
saturnalia, Williams now considers a more recent, American scheme for finding meaning: evangelical Protestantism. This man, Klaus, had come to America from Europe and made himself into a financial success. But even with this money he still found himself spiritually unfulfilled: “I kept on making / money, more and more of it, but it didn’t make / me good” (P 68). He then was visited by God, who told him to give away his money to find happiness: “Give away your money, He said, and I / will make you the richest man in the world!” (P 70). Not surprisingly, the preacher’s trite narrative falls on mostly deaf ears in the park. Interlaced with the preacher’s words, however, Williams includes several observations about the economic policies of the United States, particularly those that were frequently criticized as causes of war and poverty in the nineteen-thirties (policies also frequently criticized by Pound, one of the era’s most vocal economic critics). For example, Williams includes details of Alexander Hamilton’s interest in developing a federal manufacturing base in the valley around the Passaic Falls. Williams also includes an excerpt from polemical materials endorsing the theory of social credit, one toward which both Williams and Pound were sympathetic: “The Federal Reserve System is a private enterprise…a private monopoly…(with power)…given to it by a spineless Congress…to issue and regulate all our money” (P 73).

Thus, the preacher’s call to privilege spiritual gains over economic ones instead drives Williams to consider more deeply the material and economic conditions that have contributed to the city’s current state and, by extension, the state of the country as a whole. In essence, the call to what is transcendent leads Williams to refocus his attention on the local and the particular. Interestingly, these economic considerations do reveal some common ground between Williams and Pound, although certainly not enough to
overshadow what Williams believed to be Pound’s increasing dependence on classical literary and cultural sources. The preacher’s religious values in this section are unable to subsume the material conditions of life and give meaning to them in a way that has any effect on Dr. P., Williams’s persona in the poem, or the townspeople of Paterson: “with monotonous insistence / the falls of his harangue hung featureless / upon the ear, yet with a certain strangeness / as if arrested in space” (P 70). Thus, in Book Two Williams examines other ways of infusing meaning into his experience, specifically by seeking parallels between his current conditions and insights available from classical and religious sources. But the concrete details of events in the park resist the possibility of transformation into a classically informed scheme, and the appeals of a religious perspective fail to subsume the material and economic details of the local culture into a traditional framework of metaphysical value.

VI.

If Paterson’s progress does resemble the course of the Passaic River, as Williams contends, then the energy of Books One and Two, “the river above the Falls [and] the catastrophe of the Falls itself,” seems to drop considerably with Books Three and Four, “the river below the Falls and the entrance at the end into the great sea” (P xiii). These books are less able to propel the poem forward with new ideas about, or attitudes towards, the poem’s dominant themes. Book Three is titled “The Library,” and it begins with the poem’s persona seeking comfort in the town’s library: “A cool of books / will sometimes lead the mind to libraries / of a hot afternoon, if books can be found / cool to the sense to lead the mind away” (P 96). Williams predictably finds the knowledge
available in the library only a distraction when divorced from the concrete conditions outside of its walls. Williams contrasts this knowledge with a “Beautiful thing” (P 97) that he finds within the library, which initially appears to be a “dove” or bird that has been trapped within the library. This “beautiful thing” reminds Williams of the active, vital world that contrasts with the world inside the library: “The library is desolation, it has a smell of its own / of stagnation and death // Beautiful Thing!” (P 101). Williams also draws a contrast between the library and physical desire, which was constantly thwarted in Book Two, as he implores an unnamed woman to undress: “Your clothes (I said) quickly, while / your beauty is attainable” (P 105).

Williams ruminates on the possibility of separating the kernel of beauty or meaning from the mass that surrounds it: “Give it up. Quit it. Stop writing. / ‘Saintlike’ you will never separate that stain of sense […] from the inert mass. Never” (P 108). Again Williams views “the beautiful thing,” or what he also calls “The radiant gist that / resists the final crystallization,” as “unapproached by symbols” (P 109). This sense of resistance and unapproachability connects these images with the grasshoppers of Book Two and the “triple piled” images of Book One, which “clarify and compress” yet also are able to “escape” “the names by which they think to trap it.” Amid Williams’s concern with capturing and conveying these elusive yet meaningful images, he again raises questions about the adequacy of his audience:
Doctor, do you believe in
‘the people,’ the Democracy? Do
you still believe—in this
swill-hole of corrupt cities?
Do you, Doctor? Now?

Give up
the poem. Give up the shilly-
shally of art. (P 109)

In the second section of Book Three Williams again wonders how his poetry could reach
the townspeople of Paterson who seem so unequipped to read it. Williams records some
of the townspeople’s comments about his writing: “A wonderful gift! How do / you find
the time for it in // your busy life? It must be a great / thing to have such a pastime”; or,
from another resident: “Geez, Doc, I guess it’s all right / but what the hell does it mean?”
(P 114).

Book Three does manage to move the poem forward when Williams considers the
three disasters that befell the city in 1902: a fire on February 8, which destroyed the
library and was made worse by strong winds; a flood the following month, which was
compounded by the large chunks of ice carried by the river; and a rare tornado later in the
year. Williams explores the transforming power of these events and the potential results:
“the cyclonic fury, the fire, / the leaden flood and finally / the cost” (P 114). What most
distinguishes these natural forces is their potential to transform the city entirely, even if it
is done through destruction. Previously in the poem Williams often bemoaned how the
history and beauty of the city inevitably fell on the deaf ears of Paterson’s residents. But
in the power of “the cyclonic fury, the fire, / and the leaden flood” Williams finds forces
too powerful to be ignored—forces that will transform the city and those within it
regardless of their willingness. Williams first discusses the fire and the potential for its
destructive force to create beauty, particularly in the example of a glass bottle: “The glass / splotched with concentric rainbows / of cold fire that the fire has bequeathed / there as it cools, its flame / defied” (P 118). This transformed bottle becomes associated with “the beautiful thing”: “Beautiful thing, your / vulgarity of beauty surpasses all their / perfections!” (P 120). Even the destruction of the library represents no cause to mourn, as Williams continues to address the “Beautiful thing”: the library “must go down also— / BECAUSE IT IS SILENT. IT / IS SILENT BY DEFECT OF VIRTUE IN THAT IT / CONTAINS NOTHING OF YOU” (P 123).

Williams extends this transforming power that shaped the bottle to the whole town of Paterson, refiguring the destruction of the town as an opportunity to begin anew. “The sullen, leaden flood” (P 130) becomes cleansing: “the water at this stage no lullaby but a piston, / cohabitous, scouring the stones” (P 136). Still, the challenge of what the flood leaves in its wake is considerable: “a sort of muck, a detritus, / […] a pustular scum, a decay, a choking / lifelessness” (P 140). As Williams wonders how to resume after the flood, he weds this question with his poetry: “How to begin to find a shape—to begin to begin again, / turning the inside out : to find one phrase that will / lie married beside another for delight” (P 140).

Williams contrasts his efforts “to begin again” with those of Eliot and Pound, his usual modernist adversaries. Amid his description of the flood Williams includes an excerpt from a letter from Pound that he received while the latter was incarcerated in St. Elizabeth’s hospital. In it Pound has some not so subtle reading suggestions for Williams:

re read all the Gk tragedies in
Loeb.—plus Frobenius, plus Gesell.
plus Brooks Adams
ef you ain’t read him all. —
Then Golding’s Ovid is in
Everyman’s lib.

& nif you want a readin
list ask papa— (P 138)

Immediately after Pound’s advocacy for the classics Williams includes a description of
the “SUBSTRATUM” found while digging a 2100-feet-deep artesian well in Paterson in
1879. Williams takes this information from William Nelson’s History of the City of
Paterson and the County of Passaic New Jersey (P 252); he also includes this note
regarding the well: “The fact that the rock salt of England, and of some of the other salt
mines of Europe, is found in rocks of the same age as this, raises the question whether it
may not also be found here” (P 139). This passage serves as a humorous retort to Pound,
as Williams shows that if our focus is on “the ground,” as he advocated in In the
American Grain, then what is found in England and Europe might “also be found here” in
Paterson. Just a few pages later Williams also confronts Eliot and his version of renewal
in The Waste Land: “Who is it spoke of April? Some / insane engineer. There is no
recurrence. / The past is dead” (P 142). Any potential for renewal, in Williams’s terms,
will be wholly new, rather than dependent on a “recurrence” of past ideas or values.

Although this last section of Book Three advocates a cleansing destruction of
Paterson so that the city might “begin again,” Williams begins Book Four by returning to
the failures of the people to understand and potentially gain from what he is advocating.
In a note that accompanied the publication of Book Three, Williams included some
prefatory remarks about the poem’s upcoming finale, Book Four: “Book IV will show the
perverse confusions that come of a failure to untangle the language and make it our own
as both man and woman are carried helplessly toward the sea (of blood) which, by their failure of speech, awaits them. The poet alone in this world holds the key to their final rescue” (P 279). The first section of Book Four recounts the adventures of Phyllis, a young woman from Paterson who becomes romantically involved with a wealthy woman in New York as well as with the familiar persona of Dr. Paterson. Phyllis (the name is actually given to her by the woman from New York) appears ignorant and dimwitted; both her lovers read poems to her but she does not understand them. When taking a boat trip with her New York friend to Canada, she describes the Indian guide that accompanies them: “Anyway he speaks french and the Missis talks to him in that language. I don’t know what they’re saying (and I don’t care, I can talk my own language)” (P 167). Williams associates Phyllis with the indistinct mass of people involved in “how / the money’s made” in New York: “At the / sanitary lunch hour packed woman to / woman (or man to woman, what’s the difference?) / the flesh of their faces gone / to fat or gristle, without recognizable outline” (P 165). Very little is learned by any of the three involved in these episodes, particularly so for Phyllis.

As Book Four continues Williams offers a counterpoint to Phyllis in Madame Curie, a woman of great knowledge, yet one with no connections to Paterson. Her experiments with uranium inspire a subject rhyme for Williams with the “radiant gist” of Book Three and the potential to discover knowledge in unexpected moments:

knowledge, the contaminant
Uranium, the complex atom, breaking down, a city in itself, that complex atom, always breaking down to lead.

But giving off that, to an exposed plate, will reveal . (P 177)
As Williams considers the potential inherent in the unexpected radiation that Curie’s discovery emits, he alludes back to his discussion of monetary policy from Book Two and attempts to draw a connection between the uranium and money: “Money: Uranium (bound to be lead) / throws out the fire / —the radium’s the credit” (P 181). Williams pushes this connection further: “Release the Gamma rays that cure the cancer / . the cancer, usury. Let Credit / out . out from between the bars / before the bank windows” (P 182). This interesting moment in the poem represents Williams’s most concrete directive for improving the conditions of his contemporary culture. Yet Williams also presents what is likely one of the more difficult concepts for a reader of the poem to grasp, particularly after his repeated criticisms of his audience’s slim potential for understanding. Williams delves deeper into the esoteric language of social credit by including excerpts from his correspondence with Pound, another advocate of monetary reform whose language lends no clarity in this matter. If Williams’s assertion that “[t]he poet alone in this world holds the key to their final rescue” is true, it seems unlikely that this section of the poem will indeed serve as “the key” to “rescue” the denizens of Paterson.

The end of Book Four calls into question Williams’s notion that “the poet alone” can “rescue” the ill-informed and misguided people of Paterson. The final section of this book includes large, versified excerpts from the 1901 prose work A Little Story of Old Paterson as Told by an Old Man (P 293). Interspersed among these quaint descriptions of nineteenth-century Paterson are incidents of violence from the city’s history, which cause Williams to question his entire project: “They are used to death and / jubilate at it […] /
—you cannot believe / that it can begin again, again, here” (P 198). Williams’s previous notion that the destructive forces of nature could bring about a new beginning seems undermined by the destructive impulses of the people of Paterson. Book Four, which represents “the entrance at the end into the great sea,” ends with a man, presumably some embodiment of Dr. Paterson, swimming out of the sea back to shore and then heading inland “to begin again” (P xiv), as Williams puts it. This move may give a sense of symmetry to the poem as a whole, but it more troublingly suggests that “the poet alone” has been unable to utilize whatever “key” he had for the benefit of his poetic audience. Williams also connects this final figure returning inland with Odysseus (P xiv), which suggests an inveterate wanderer whose work will never be completed. Such a connection would surely be comforting to Williams at this point, for it implies the value of the journey or adventure over any resolution that may be found.

VII.

The notion that the work of Paterson cannot be wholly resolved in any satisfying manner leads Williams to complete a Book Five and work on a Book Six, which was incomplete upon his death. These added sections push the poem further away from its original intentions as a cultural epic and towards a more subjective expression of the poet’s experience. Williams humorously alludes to this more personal perspective in Book Five: “You can learn from poems / that an empty head tapped on / sounds hollow / in any language!” (P 231). Williams dedicates Book Five to the painter Henri Toulouse Lautrec, who had previously appeared in the following passage in Book Three:
Toulouse Lautrec witnessed it: limbs relaxed
—all religions have excluded it—
at ease, the tendons untensed. (P 111)

Toulouse Lautrec intricately portrayed the body’s motion, the kind of physical details that Williams feels have been “excluded” by “all religions.” In Book Five Williams focuses on the intimacies of physical desire as a means of engaging life: “‘Loose your love to flow’ / while you are yet young / male and female” (P 214). As a counterpart to physical desire, Williams also asserts the power of the imagination as a way out of “death”:

But there is a hole
in the bottom of the bag.

It is the imagination
which cannot be fathomed.
It is through this hole
we escape . . . (P 210)

Williams’s assertions of the power of desire and imagination sound less like a cultural prescription and more like a poet in old age reflecting on his experiences. Williams suggests this subjective note in a comment from an interview included in Book Five: “Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is” (P 221). If Paterson was intended to show “the resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city” (P xiii), it appears that in this additional book Williams has narrowed his focus to the mind of a modern poet and has let his concerns with the city slip away.

Williams hopes for these added books to be “directly continuous with” (P xv) the poem’s first four books. Yet it is these four books that suggest why Williams takes the
poem in a more limited, subjective direction. Williams consistently advocates throughout *Paterson* for an attention to the concrete details specific to one’s locality as the means of understanding one’s cultural conditions. Yet at the same time he consistently expresses his concern that the people of Paterson are unable or unwilling to understand the lessons that the poem attempts to provide. Part of the problem lies with the insights that Williams discovers in the poem: they are frequently rooted in specific, isolated images, whose elusiveness to definition Williams repeatedly emphasizes. Thus, characterizing such moments offers a substantial challenge to Williams as poet, irrespective of for whom these observations may be intended. Yet Williams continually raises this question of competency in his audience, which eventually derails the broad cultural aim that he intended for this work.

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1 From page v, although the page itself is unnumbered. Further quotations from *In the American Grain* will be cited parenthetically as *IAG* with page number included; *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* as *SL*; *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* as *SE*; *Paterson* as *P*; *The Embodiment of Knowledge* as *EK*; and *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* as *A*.

2 In his introduction to *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Ron Loewinsohn discusses this notion of “process” in Williams’s work: “Knowledge itself, which Williams seeks to embody […] knowledge itself is a process, not something acquired or achieved permanently at the end of an arduous pursuit” (*EK* xii).

3 See Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, in which she focuses on Williams’s early work and its adherence to an indeterminant, avant-garde aesthetic; Perloff also discusses Williams’s move away from this style in his late lyrics.

4 This tension in Williams’s work—between, on the one hand, poetry as an imaginative construct, a thing unto itself (or a “machine made out of words”), whose value resides solely in its construction and not in its ability to represent or signify something outside of itself; and, on the other hand, poetry needing to be grounded very deliberately in its local conditions: the people, language, and values of one’s local culture, which means the poetry is very much enmeshed in the external discourses that surround its inception—is
discussed by several critics. See John Lowney’s The American Avant-Garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory; also Daniel Morris’ The Writings of William Carlos Williams: Publicity for the Self. Walter Benn Michaels discusses this tension as part of the nativist strain in Williams work; see especially pages 72-85.
CHAPTER 3

WALLACE STEVENS’S “AN ORDINARY EVENING IN NEW HAVEN”: THE “INESCAPABLE ROMANCE” OF PLACE

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world…
—“Esthétique du Mal”

I.

Much recent criticism of Wallace Stevens’s work has emphasized the importance of the social, historical, and political facets of the external world to his poetry, working against the deeply entrenched view of Stevens as the supreme poet of the imagination.¹ Yet, despite these valuable critical contributions, the attitude persists that Stevens’s poetic voice becomes increasingly detached from the concerns of the external world in his later work, particularly during the forties and early fifties.² After all, no argument can dismiss the fact that the first dictum in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is “It Must Be Abstract,” while the charge that “It Must Adhere to the Real,” or “It Must Reflect Its Historical Situation,” is noticeably absent. The works that have become most representative of this late period in Stevens’s work—“Esthétique du Mal,” “Credences of Summer,” “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” and “An
Ordinary Evening in New Haven”—demonstrate the poet’s mastery of the long, meditative poem and its possibilities for extended, abstract musings on the relationship between poetry and lived experience. Even James Longenbach, persuasive advocate for the social and political element in Stevens’s poetry, acknowledges Stevens’s growing disinterest in such concerns after *Transport to Summer*. More specifically, Longenbach finds “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” lacking the “historical weight” he finds in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” even though it does offer an “exquisite experience of poetry” (290-1). Similarly, Frank Lentricchia considers such a long poem an “epic of bourgeois interiority,” “this poetry of the desire for poetry” (162).

This scheme that posits a growing disinterest with the realities of the external world in Stevens’s later work, at least prior to the poems of *The Rock*, situates “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” at the height of this movement toward “exquisite,” metapoetical abstraction. For example, Thomas A. Fink finds the poem reveling in the “seemingly infinite possibilities of playful, stimulating, and fascinating ‘troping’ or turning of potential significations” (88). These elements of “affirmative play” (88) are certainly present within the poem, supporting the view of Stevens’s late voice as one committed to metapoetical abstractions and linguistic playfulness. I would argue, however, that “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” also reveals a significant reappearance of explicit considerations of the external world—specifically, considerations of the notion of place as represented by New Haven. Further, this concern with place as physical reality provides Stevens with the opportunity to reconsider his commitments to abstracted and metaphorical language in his later work and consider the possibilities of a more direct, realistic poetic mode.
“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” was first published in *Auroras of Autumn* in 1950, which places it toward the end of the decade during which Stevens composed the essays that would become *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (all of these essays were published separately between 1942 and 1951). These essays show Stevens confronting his reputation as a supreme poet of the imagination and attempting to articulate his poetry’s vital connection with the concrete realities of the world. Stevens makes this argument most interestingly in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” written during the Second World War. In this intricate essay Stevens attempts to place the work of poetry among the great historical and cultural shifts of the mid-twentieth century, while arguing that poetry should be both beyond, and accountable to, the events of the actual world. Ultimately Stevens asserts that “the nature of poetry [...] is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals” (659); yet he also sees a tension between these two imperatives, with “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (665). Stevens locates this “pressure of reality” among the major historical and cultural changes of his era, particularly the violence of the world war and the cultural effects of the rapidly growing middle class in America. Stevens sees this “pressure of reality” as “the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual” (656). Yet Stevens also believes that “individuals of extraordinary imagination” can “cancel [...] the pressure” through “resistance” or “evasion” (656) and thus do not need to be responsive to the specific events or issues of their time. The essential requisite for the poet is “to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in
his imagination” (657). Thus, for Stevens, the poet must be both responsive to reality but also beyond it when composing the poem; the crux of the poem, then, lies at the convergence of reality with the poet’s imagination. It is this intricate interplay between reality, embodied in the concreteness of place, and the imagination that becomes Stevens’s concern in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.”

Within “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” “place” operates as a subset of the larger category of reality, or as a more specific element of all that is considered external to the thinking and perceiving subject —“reality” as the “Emersonian” “not-self” or “Not-Me,” as Harold Bloom identifies it (307). But unlike other subcategories of reality such as nature or landscape, “place” has a specificity, an unalterable quality resistant to the poet’s attempts at transformation. A specific place like New Haven possesses certain essential qualities, or a certain coherence as reality, prior to its inscription within the poem. Put simply, one can locate New Haven, identify characteristics that allow it to be known collectively, prior to and after its inclusion within the poem, and the poet remains unable to alter these facts. Thus we can distinguish New Haven, or other locations mentioned in the poem, like Bergamo or Rome, from a place imaginatively conceived, like the exotic “land of the lemon trees” in Canto XXIX (415), or the “white” “cabin” “on a beach” in “The Auroras of Autumn” (355)—locations whose existence is entirely inscribed within their respective poems.

The appearance of place in Stevens’s poetry, of course, is not unique to this poem, and other critics have analyzed the use of place in Stevens’s earlier works. John N. Serio, for example, discusses the changing conception of place between Stevens’s early poetry and later meditations, looking at “The Comedian as the Letter C” and “Credences of
Summer” as representative poems of these two respective periods. Serio finds in the early poetry “an affair with reality at a physical, and, thus, unalterable, level,” which contrasts with the late poetry as “an affair with reality at a *meta*physical level; that is, it expresses the belief that reality is, ultimately, a fiction, and as such, transformable” (26). Serio offers convincing readings of these two poems, thus supporting the notion that Stevens’s later, meditative poems move toward a more abstract, subjective voice divorced from the “physical” “reality” of the external world. I believe “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” is unique, then, for its repeated concerns with the physicality of place, which complicates the accepted distinctions between Stevens’s early and late work and reveals Stevens’s continued fascination with place as a “physical” and “unalterable” reality. In this poem, Stevens uses the occasion of place and its unalterable physicality to investigate the possibilities of a more reductive, metonymic mode for his poetry in juxtaposition with his more typically metaphorical, analogical mode.

II.

Stevens’s prose reveals his fondness for the concept of analogy, which he often uses as a catch-all term for any figural language. For example, in “Effects of Analogy,” he goes so far as to claim that “when one speaks of images, one means analogies,” and that “[t]here is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel” (710, 714). Such comments indicate the degree to which this idea of analogy permeates Stevens’s thoughts about poetry, nature, and the imagination—essentially the poet’s entire realm of existence, at least for Stevens. And when we consider the rhetorical import of this term on conceptions of
poetic language, we can see why it was such an appealing term to Stevens. Rhetorical and linguistic analysis consistently associates analogy with metaphorical modes of language, modes based on resemblance and impression rather than a more limiting, direct relationship between the text and what it signifies. Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s recent rhetorical studies of American poetry, for example, make such distinctions among poetic language in terms of metaphorical and metonymic tropes: metaphor “works with analogies to reveal resemblances,” “claim[ing] cognitive value yet avoid[ing] reductive equivalencies, proposing only ‘adequate’ representations” (4). Metonymy, on the other hand, works by “reducing the intangible to the tangible, the immaterial to material proofs, manifestations, signs” (4); further, in metonymic figures, “the signified, tenor, or subject is prior to and has no natural relationship to the signifier, vehicle, or text that comes after and represents it according to convention” (6). Metaphor, in essence, allows expansiveness and variability, while metonymy encourages limiting and reductive significations often associated with realistic modes of literary language.

Stevens, not surprisingly, consistently resists metonymy’s “reductiveness” and “conventionality” in favor of the more expansive “correspondences and resemblances” of metaphor, which seem to create a spacious arena of imaginative play for Stevens, particularly in his later poetry. Metonymic language suggests mere representation and belatedness, which can engender a sense of creative impotence, whereas metaphor provides the immediacy of its own invention. Yet language as mere representation also contains the allure of direct statement, of direct conveyance of experience—a potential means of approaching Stevens’s ever-sought after reality. “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” begins with this notion, described as “The eye’s plain version,” “The vulgate of
experience” (397). Yet Stevens immediately qualifies this image with the self-mocking inclusion of “A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—” (397). As most readers of Stevens would know, this kind of qualification, with the forwarding of a position and then an immediate back-step from it, typifies Stevens’s meditative voice. It is significant, nonetheless, that the poem begins by suggesting a more direct, more “plain” “version” of “experience,” of perceiving the “houses” of New Haven. The anticipated qualification to this notion comes most clearly in the second canto, as the possibility of “the eye’s plain version,” of perception more direct and less mediated, is replaced by the possibility of perception as imaginative construct and projection, where “these houses are composed of ourselves” (397). Instead of the “difficult objects” of canto I, New Haven as subjective construction becomes “an impalpable town,” fleeting and ephemeral, as the once potentially solid houses become “habitations that seem to move / In the movement of the colors of the mind” (397).

These early passages establish the important ideas with which much of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” will struggle. In their most basic terms, the two ideas under consideration are reality and the imagination (hardly a surprise with Stevens). Yet Stevens’s ongoing musings and conjectures throughout the poem discourage efforts to simplify what he discovers. More specifically, the poem offers, on one hand, a “plain version” of “experience” more dependent upon the objective realm, focusing more on accurate representation than subjective improvisations. The other possibility amounts to a highly subjective, “impalpable” experience that appears to risk solipsism, consisting merely of the moving “colors of the mind.” Yet it is worth noting that the first option does not constitute an experience of reality itself, but rather a particular “version” of it.
As Stevens’s body of work consistently confirms, there can be no unmediated experience, no matter how closely we manage to approach reality. So even the attempt to privilege the objective world contains some degree of mediation. And when, in canto IX, Stevens characterizes the root of this struggle as his desire for “The poem of pure reality, untouched / By trope or deviation” (402, emphasis added), it becomes clear that language is the medium from which he cannot escape. Thus, even at the beginning of the poem, the choice is not simply between a direct, objective experience and a mediated, subjective one. Instead, it is between varying degrees of interference, or different “versions” of linguistic mediation: a “plain,” representational language that in its reductiveness may approach a potentially satisfying degree of equivalence between a text and what it signifies; or a more playful, subjective language that in its search for analogies and resemblances may also run the risk of dissociation from the true nature of experience.

Even early in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” Stevens plays with the idea of collapsing these distinctions that privilege either the subjective or the objective. For example, at the end of canto II, Stevens reaches a point where “we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea” (398). This appears to be a point, in other words, where one can no longer distinguish an “idea,” which may have preceded and been separate from the thinking subject, from “the bearer-being,” or the thinking subject itself. This conflation may seem to favor the subjective realm, as one could argue that the confusion occurs between the mind and what it generates, effacing the presence of anything objective. But I believe the passage highlights the difficulties in distinguishing two elements of cognition such as thinker and idea, thereby raising the possibility of a comforting ignorance when faced with such confusion. Canto III begins with a similar
conflation: “The point of vision and desire are the same” (398). Here the terms used correspond more closely to the poem’s original opposition, with “vision” suggesting a more passive act of perception analogous to “the eye’s plain version,” and “desire” suggesting a more active, aggressive subjective posture.

Yet as often happens in this “endlessly elaborating poem,” statements such as these suggest Stevens arriving at a firm position, which he quickly proceeds to undermine. The possibility of an equitable resolution between the poem’s dominant terms passes, as cantos IV and V enact the poet’s desire to acquiesce to the enticements of a wholly imaginative existence. This process begins by devaluing an objective, imaginatively bereft attitude toward the world:

The plainness of plain things is savagery,  
As: the last plainness of a man who has fought  
Against illusion and was, in a great grinding

Of growing teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out  
By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in plain towns  
Are not precise about the appeasement they need. (399)

This comical figure who fights against the “illusion” of the imagination proves the futility of such an endeavor, at last subdued by “the obese opiates of sleep” and the dreams of fancy that inevitably follow. In canto V Stevens assumes a position accepting this inevitability, apparently embracing the mediated, imaginatively constructed nature of existence:

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice  
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind,

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room […] (399)
Here nothing can be perceived directly, and Stevens seems willing to abandon the myth of “disillusion,” of unmediated perception, as itself the ultimate “illusion.” Faced with such an “inescapable” fate, the best recourse seems to be the embracing of “romance” and “dreams” rather than the struggle against them. The imagination should be allowed to create, to construct realities, without concern for an ultimately illusory objective world.

Again, though, in true Stevensian fashion, the poem undermines a position almost as quickly as it asserts one. And it is New Haven itself that undermines this assertion of “reality” as an “inescapable choice of dreams.” Even a seemingly ordinary, quotidian town brings back Stevens’s interest in the real:

In the presence of such chapels and such schools,
The impoverished architects appear to be
Much richer, more fecund, sportive and alive.

The objects tingle and the spectator moves
With the objects. (400-1)

In this passage Stevens finds an undeniable value in the tangible objects of New Haven, which can bolster the sense of life in their creators, making them “appear” “richer, more fecund, sportive and alive.” The passage even suggests that the liveliness found in the objects of the town can be transferred to the observing subjects, as “the spectator moves / With the objects”—a position that mitigates the willingness in canto V to accept a “divided” “world” (399). Significantly, this canto conveys no sense that the observer himself causes the liveliness in these “chapels” and “schools” through an act of the imagination. Instead, the perception of a genuine “presence” triggers this return to a reality outside of the mind’s imaginings. And in canto VIII, Stevens asserts that this reality in New Haven can have a restorative effect: “We descend to the street and inhale a
health of air / To our sepulchral hollows” (401). Hence, we find, with little surprise, that Stevens’s “Love of the real” (401) is not easily dismissed. Instead, as he states later in canto XV, it is natural that “The instinct for heaven had its counterpart: / The instinct for earth, for New Haven” (406).

This “instinct for earth,” for what is putatively more real, achieves its apotheosis in canto IX, as Stevens seeks his “poem of pure reality”:

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

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

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye […] (402)

Again, this passage that begins as an apotheosis of the desire for “the real” in fact reaffirms the inherently mediated nature of perception, as well as the fact that this mediating function results from language. Stevens does not seek “pure reality,” but only “the poem of pure reality” (emphasis added), something constituted by language. He would like a poem “untouched / By trope or deviation,” at least approximating direct perception, but then he immediately qualifies such a desire, as this poem moves “straight to the word, / Straight to the transfixing object […]” Fink argues that these two destinations for “the poem of pure reality,” despite their “juxtaposition,” are “two separate paths which never quite cross” (90). But I believe the syntax of these clauses and the ones that follow, with their smooth cadences and steady repetition of words, supports a coherence and complicity between these ideas rather than “separate paths.” One may
easily read the following as possessing a significant degree of continuity: “straight to the
word, / Straight to the transfixing object, to the object // At the exactest point at which it
is itself, / Transfixing by being purely what it is […]” The ideas here move smoothly and
steadily, with little to indicate discontinuity. Within such a scheme, the movement from
“the word” to “the transfixing object” becomes progressive, which makes this concept a
schematic of perception predicated upon linguistic mediation. One begins with a concept
or idea (here it is “the real” to which Stevens keeps coming back), but when one tries to
put the experience of this idea into language, one must begin with the words that will
represent the perceived “object.” The experience of reading this “poem” would
necessarily be the same: one could perceive “the transfixing object” only after the initial
negotiation with the words used to describe it.

Such a framework posits poetic language at its most functional, its most
representational. Or, to put it differently, the trope here is metonymic rather than
metaphorical. The progression of terms in the above passage, between “the word” and
“the transfixing object,” suggests a conventional, fixed relationship that contrasts with the
more expansive, resemblance-revealing process of metaphor. Stevens’s terms also
suggest the inherent split between “word” and “object,” or the text and what it signifies,
that constitutes metonymy as trope—a split that foregrounds the temporal belatedness of
the figure relative to what it represents. And when in this canto Stevens alludes to New
Haven, the poem’s impetus toward praise of the real, this separation persists as
perception remains distanced from the thing itself. Only “a view” of the city is possible,
even at this moment when desire for the real reaches its zenith.
Taken on its own, Stevens’s desire for “the poem of pure reality” in canto IX does not seem in itself unsatisfactory, despite its inherent linguistic element. Yet in the context of the poem as a whole, this tentative position, like most in the poem, proves unsatisfactory to some degree, which motivates Stevens to repeatedly rehearse alternatives. This central, overarching tension in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” significantly impacts any reading of the poem: its structure as “endlessly elaborating” suggests the seduction of repeated troping, of repeatedly saying something again in a different manner, even while more discrete passages and cantos explore the limitations of this position. Similarly, many critics rightly point out that the poem does not progress in a teleological fashion to build toward conclusion and resolution. Rather, the poem provides us with repeated acts of qualification throughout, always stepping back elusively when it seems it may be pinned down. Alan Filreis finds this quality a “central paradox” in Stevens’s late work, as it is “diachronic to sustain its synchronicity, a general moving forward somehow designed to keep the wheels turning.”7 This fact of the poem challenges our traditional critical frameworks as readers and interpreters, including my own strategy of moving in a generally sequential manner through the poem thus far. Such an approach works to a degree, as we can locate the initial appearance of ideas and explore their permutations. But proceeding sequentially serves more of an organizational function than a logical one; since the poem does not move toward resolution, one could ostensibly discuss Stevens’s musings on modes of language in a different order without significantly altering one’s interpretive insights.8

I include this recognition of interpretive limitations as a preface to my discussion of canto XII, for this canto provides a tentative sense of resolution to Stevens’s musings
thus far in the poem, in spite of the poem’s unerring ability to avoid any satisfying sense of closure. In simple terms, the poem began by elucidating the two versions of experience it would play against each other: a more realistic, “plain version” of experience and a more subjective, imaginatively conceived one. The difficulty of finding satisfaction with either of these choices, as both are conceptually rooted in the belatedness of language, becomes most acute for Stevens when faced with the undeniable physicality of New Haven in cantos VII and VIII. Canto IX offers an initial response to this difficulty with its desire for “the poem of pure reality.” In canto XII, however, Stevens responds to and elaborates upon these musings, for in canto IX the conception of language and its relation to the real was one of unavoidable mediation, which carries with it a sense of displacement and belatedness from the immediacy of experience. In canto XII Stevens posits another version of “the poem of pure reality,” this time embodied in the presence of voice:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.
The poet speaks the poem as it is,

Not as it was: part of the reverberation
Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues
Are like newspapers blown by the wind. (404)

Here Stevens seeks a poetic mode that can capture the essence of experience, that can become an integral part of the “occasion” itself rather than merely being “about it.” We see this “cry” seeking to bridge the temporal gap inherent in representation, attempting to situate the poem squarely in the present, in the “occasion” “as it is” rather than “as it was.” This desire seeks to fulfill the essential lack of presence created by language; it is, in essence, the constitutive desire that language use creates. Thus, identifying this poem
as a “cry” conveys an appropriate sense of urgency for what is at stake here. Yet, precisely because the stakes are so high, the ambitions for poetry so great, one senses the need for qualification even outside of this particular poem’s tendency to provide it. And Stevens provides it in the second half of this canto, acknowledging the inevitably of some temporal gap:

The mobile and the immobile flickering
In the area between is and was are leaves,
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves whirling in the gutters, whirlings
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
Together, said words of the world are the life of the world. (404)

Not surprisingly, Stevens is forced to acknowledge a space between “is and was,” as the possibility of pure presence within language remains an impossibility. What may be most impressive here is the force with which Stevens resists any sense of resignation when faced with the inevitable limits of language. He takes this temporal gap and fills it with the powerful image of the “Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees,” as the canto continues to build toward an apotheosis of this potential for language to correspond immediately with experience, where “said words of the world are the life of the world.” Yet Stevens intersperses the continuing expression of this desire with undeniable acknowledgements of its impossibility: these “leaves” cannot come to be “the presence of thought,” or “the presences of thoughts”; their function extends only as far as “resembling.” Similarly, the final stanza’s conflation of the disparate elements of experience into a final unity is mitigated by the simple inclusion of “as if” at the end of
the preceding stanza, reinforcing the fact that this final synthesis can only be an approximation. Here Stevens tries his best to ignore the inevitability he cannot escape, placing this crucial “as if” where it may be overlooked, hoping one might read the final stanza on its own. Yet the qualification remains, and, despite the possibilities it denies, it helps to maintain the integrity of Stevens’s contemplative process within the poem.

This failure to attain the presence of voice by construing the poem as impassioned “cry,” though an expected failure, is a particularly powerful one due to the imaginative force of the canto; it also reveals Stevens’s reliance on the imaginative force of metaphor to replace the unattainable unity of expression that this canto seeks. For as the poet encounters the inability of language to signify “the presence of thought,” he employs the metaphor of the “burnished” “leaves” as compensation for this deferred presence. In keeping with its structure as metaphor, this image provides a resemblance of that deferred presence, an approximation that generates the crucial “as if” prior to the final stanza’s vision of unified experience. As a necessarily mediated linguistic expression, this trope can only provide resemblance rather than unity, which adheres to the poem’s (and Stevens’s in general) consistent acknowledgement of mediation as the inescapable condition of experience. What becomes quite clear within this canto is the imaginative potential inherent in the resemblances and approximations of metaphor: its power to avoid “reductive equivalencies” makes possible an image as moving as this canto’s “burnished” “leaves.” The force of this image contrasts with the reductive, metonymic scheme of canto IX, as Stevens considered an escape from “trope or deviation” with the more limiting move directly from “word” to “object.” Although canto XII’s metaphor
cannot offer such a direct, potentially unerring movement between the text and reality, it allows Stevens to replace this representational lack with the vitality of an imaginative construction.

III.

In keeping with the poem’s oscillating structure, subsequent cantos quickly mitigate canto XII’s seemingly strong case for metaphor as the preferred mode of linguistic expression, and again the physical reality of New Haven figures prominently in this qualification of metaphor’s desirability. Cantos XIII and XIV introduce the character of “Professor Eucalyptus of New Haven” (405), whom Bloom identifies as “a parody of Stevens” (322) and his ongoing search for “God in the object itself” (405). Through this self-parodic figure Stevens mocks his recurring search for metaphysical meaning in the quotidian, with his “eye that does not look // Beyond the object” (405). Of course, Stevens cannot help but move beyond the immediate object in his poetry and into the realm of abstraction. But in these passages his alter-ego, Professor Eucalyptus, amusingly attempts to train his focus exclusively on the “object” he finds in his room while ignoring the less manageable physical reality that lies just outside his window, in “the ramshackle spout in which / The rain falls with a ramshackle sound” (405). In spite of these distractions, Stevens associates the Professor’s focus on the “object” with “The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room, / The gay tournamonde as of a single world // In which he is and as and is are one” (406). Here again, the poem suggests the possibility of a direct, objective focus on reality that can convey the immediacy of experience, where its mediated nature becomes indistinguishable from experience itself, or where “as and is
are one.” This possibility does not exactly constitute an alternative to the metaphorical mode of experience from canto XII; the self-mocking tone of these passages suggests that Stevens himself finds his constant oscillations between varied modes of experience humorous. Instead, Stevens reveals that, despite his attempts to move deliberately through these dialectical musings, the uncontrollability of the mundane world around him manages to intrude upon this process. Here this possible conception of a “single world” where “as and is are one” cannot overcome the distraction of the rain and the water-spout, as “The rain [that] kept falling loudly” (406) outside of this particular “world” cannot be ignored. In canto XIII, Stevens acknowledges a similar “difficulty” presented by the physical realities that remain external to any subjective constructions, as “visible” reality, such as “The actual landscape,” presents a challenge to any imagined, “invisible” worlds. Stevens reveals this dilemma as he acknowledges “The difficulty of the visible / To the nations of the clear invisible” (405).

As the poem moves through its middle cantos after the introduction of Professor Eucalyptus, Stevens continues his seemingly self-defeating process, continually acknowledging the unavoidable mediation of experience while still seeking the means of overcoming it. Significantly, these discussions do not overtly consider language’s specific function in determining the nature of experience. Nonetheless, important similarities do persist between the ideas discussed in these middle cantos and those ideas outlined in the poem’s earlier sections, such as Stevens’s recurring desire to approach and perceive the physical reality around him. From this desire arises Stevens’s ongoing concern with the sense of separation resulting from the inherent belatedness of representation, that unavoidable temporal gap between “the poem as it is,” and what the
poem signifies “as it was.” Again, this dilemma of belatedness is more closely associated with a realistic, metonymic trope, which constructs the relationship between signifier and signified in a conventional manner (moving in a fixed, “straight” pattern between “object” and “word”), which contrasts with a metaphoric trope that partially assuages this sense of belatedness with the novelty of its own invention. In canto XVIII Stevens explores his fears of irrelevance, of falling into mere imitation and repetition, that are generated by the possibility of belatedness in artistic expression:

It is the window that makes it difficult
To say good-by to the past and to live and to be
In the present state of things as, say, to paint

In the present state of painting and not the state
Of thirty years ago. It is looking out
Of the window and walking in the street and seeing,

As if the eyes were the present or part of it,
As if the ears heard any shocking sound,
As if life and death were ever physical. (408)

This passage conveys a dual sense of belatedness, one which arises in both life and art—in the difficulty of living “In the present,” as well as in the difficulty of painting, or more generally producing art, in a “present” mode. Of course, much of Stevens’s poetry moves toward the conflation of these two realms and revealing their division as an artificial one; later in this poem, Stevens specifically acknowledges his desire for “proof that the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life” (415). What is unusual in this passage, however, is that the immediate reality found outside of the window, found in “walking in the street and seeing,” does not assist in the desire “to live and to be / In the present,” but instead “makes it difficult.” Previously, Stevens had sought to encounter “the object / At the exactest point at which it is itself,” but here that possibility becomes strained again. In
this instance, however, the artificial conventions of language are not to blame. Instead, the passage calls into question the putatively natural acts of seeing and hearing, which it seems Stevens had assumed could allow a direct experience of reality. Such an attempt to encounter the immediacy of reality falters from the assumption that “the eyes were the present or part of it”—that visual perception, in other words, could be inseparable from the reality of that which it perceives. The act of hearing proves to be similarly lacking, as Stevens rejects the assumption that “the ears heard any shocking sound.” In this situation, then, the perceiving subject finds itself divorced from the physical world entirely, as even the simplest means of perception indicate a gap between the mind and the physical world. The subject’s perceptions of this physical world will always feel belated and distanced, and the distinctions between a physical “past” and a perceiving “present” persist.

This acute sense of separation from the physical world implies experience at its most isolated, its most solipsistic. Previously in the poem, the subjective act of metaphor had raised the possibility of one becoming distanced from the immediacy of reality, because metaphor relies on the imagination to construct resemblances between the perceiving subject and its experience of that reality. Now this division seems not only to be precipitated by language use and its inherent gap between signifier and signified, but also by the most basic acts of perception. Consciousness itself, in other words, becomes an experience of isolation in these passages. Canto XIX continues to consider this notion, as its first lines posit physical reality as an experience of the mind: “The moon rose in the mind and each thing there / Picked up its radial aspect in the night, / Prostrate below the singleness of its will” (408). Under these circumstances, Stevens considers whether a scheme of such isolated subjectivity might be empowering, with the single mind
constructing its own, sufficient reality. Such a scheme may even provide a unity of experience, obviating the previously described experience of a present that only approximates a belated past. Here Stevens envisions such a coherence:

A century in which everything was part
Of that century and of its aspect, a personage,
A man who was the axis of his time,

An image that begot its infantines,
Imaginary poles whose intelligence
Streamed over chaos their civilities. (409)

Unfortunately, as Stevens wonders what the key to such an age might be, and what might allow one to be “the axis of his time,” a clear answer cannot be discovered. Instead, “A figure like Ecclesiast, / Rugged and luminous, chants in the dark / A text that is an answer, although obscure” (409). As in the previous canto, perception remains limited, “dark” and “obscure,” as Stevens cannot perceive the “answer” which this “figure” conveys. This passage suggests a sense of isolation for both Stevens and this chanting figure, as the possibility for communication and communion between them goes unrealized. Even with Stevens seeking answers and this figure chanting them, both appear mastered by the darkness and obscurity in which they find themselves, and an understanding of how to overcome the “chaos” with “civilities” remains elusive.

These considerations of the efficacy and limits of perception, although not as specifically concerned with the function of language as elsewhere in the poem, reveal similar shortcomings in the nature of experience and the ways in which its inherently mediated structure might be negotiated. Canto XVIII posits the unsettling notion that the real to which Stevens repeatedly wishes to return may in fact lack any physical reality that could be directly experienced by human perception. Thus, Stevens’s desire for
reduction, for approaching the putative reality of what can be immediately perceived, remains constantly deferred, and actual experience remains belated from any physical presence, just as the progression from “word” to “object” in canto IX left the poet unable to experience reality as “purely what it is.” Faced with this notion of isolated subjectivity, Stevens considers the mind’s potential to construct a unified world of its own that would impose its sense of order onto the external world, creating “A century in which everything was part / Of that century and of its aspect […]” Stevens considered a similar scheme in canto XII that relied more explicitly on the power to create through language, where the “words of the world” could become “the life of the world.” But this conception of language transforming reality achieved only partial success, as what the imagination conceived could only resemble the “presences of thoughts.” Similarly, the potential for the mind to create and impose order in canto XIX goes unrealized for Stevens, as the means for achieving this goal remain obscure. Instead, one senses a mounting feeling of isolation and impotence as these recurring speculations continually affirm the elusiveness of immediate experience.

Not surprisingly, though, Stevens’s concerns about experience as an intensely subjective process wane as his desire for getting closer to the real resurfaces, despite any previous intimations of the impossibility of such a convergence. In canto XXII, the character of Professor Eucalyptus reappears to remind us that “The search for reality is as momentous as the search for god”; Stevens then compares this momentous thrust with “the philosopher’s search // For an interior made exterior / And the poet’s search for the same exterior made / Interior” (410). Because Stevens so consistently straddles the fence between these two roles, seeking to be both poet and philosopher, the specific
differences between the movements from “interior” to “exterior” or “exterior” to “interior” matter less than the more general desire to conflate the two terms and bring the perceiving subject and the objective world into closer contact. Later in the poem, in keeping with his desire for immediate, concrete experience, Stevens returns to the notion of isolated subjectivity, the notion “that reality exists / In the mind,” only to dismiss it again:

If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,
The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

Misericordia, it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
Before and after one arrives […] (414)

The irony of the passage’s first phrase, “If it should be true,” signaled by its affected, contrived tone, suggests that what follows is, in fact, not true. For example, the notion that “Real and unreal” could be synonymous seems incompatible with Steven’s constant returning to the notion of some kind of tangible, perceivable real. The parallel suggestion, that “New Haven / Before and after one arrives” could also be identical, becomes similarly discounted by the poem’s insistent desire for a physical reality. For New Haven before one arrives can only be imagined—once one is there, its physical, tangible existence can be experienced, just as Stevens has done at different instances throughout the poem. This idea that an imagined New Haven could be equated with New Haven itself is further undermined by the scholar’s “note” that Stevens transcribes in the previous canto: “The Ruler of Reality, / If more unreal than New Haven, is not // A real ruler, but rules what is unreal” (414). Here again, as it has throughout the poem, New Haven serves as the poem’s touchstone for a physical, tangible reality, and those who fail
to account for its presence are left impotently to rule only “what is unreal.” Given this reaffirmation of New Haven’s tangible significance, the notion that its reality may be identical “Before and after one arrives” proves untenable, as does the larger possibility of a “reality [that] exists / In the mind.”

IV.

As the poem draws to a close, Stevens turns his attention back to a more explicit examination of language’s role in the structure of experience, reiterating some of the ideas he considered in the poem’s first twelve cantos. Canto XXIX, which originally served as the final canto in Stevens’s earlier, shorter version of this poem, presents the “brilliant” “fable” (Bloom 332) of “the land of the lemon trees” and “the land of the elm trees” (415), as the experience of the former, an imaginative, exotic locale, alters the perception of the latter, the quotidian landscape of New Haven (Bloom tells us that elms would have been part of the Connecticut landscape when Stevens was writing the poem [333]). When our representative observers, “the mariners,” return to their homes in “the land of the elm trees,” they find it “folded over, turned round” (415). The canto then makes clear that the altering power of language allows this change: “It was the same, / Except for the adjectives, an alteration / Of words that was a changing of nature […] / Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons” (415). Here Stevens appears to be reaffirming the power of the creative subject to transform through language, to fashion a new sense of reality analogous to the original. If this canto had remained as the poem’s final statement, it would have served as an uncharacteristically firm note of resolution (or
“too hopeful […] a candor” [334], as Bloom describes it) in favor of the transforming power of metaphor, and such a firm stance would have been essentially incompatible with the poem’s ruminative, “endlessly elaborating” pattern.

The two cantos eventually included after canto XXIX save the poem from such a definitive end—one that would have mitigated the nuance and complexity of the ideas considered up to that point. Canto XXX reaffirms the limited nature of imaginative, metaphorical transformation, for its first line tells us that “The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen” (416). In light of canto XII’s apotheosis of metaphor, where the “burnished” “leaves” symbolized the power of metaphorical transformation, the now fallen leaves indicate the limits of such imaginative force, as “something imagined […] has been washed away” (416). Thus, Stevens must again account for the “barrenness” (416) of an externality that can resist transformation, which forces the poem into a qualified position regarding metaphor that is more in keeping with the entirety of the work, as the addition of these final cantos affirms the poem’s struggle against the predominantly imaginative, metaphorical voice of Stevens’s other late meditative poems. Within “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” employing the “seemingly infinite possibilities” of “affirmative play” remains for Stevens only one of several possible responses to the challenges of experience, all of which are examined, compared, and rehearsed as the tentative steps and missteps in “The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement” (417).

Nonetheless, the need “to abstract reality […] by placing it in his imagination” was a constant for Stevens, despite the critical work that has essentially recovered Stevens’s subtle efforts to reflect his cultural reality—e.g., “Lettres d’un Soldat” and
World War I; “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and the Great Depression; “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and World War II—from his canonization as poet of the imagination. For example, in a note that accompanied his 1937 collection *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, Stevens adds the following comment regarding the sequence “Owl’s Clover”: “[…] while the poems reflect what was then going on in the world, that reflection is merely for the purpose of seizing and stating what makes life intelligible and desirable in the midst of great change and great confusion. The effect of *Owl’s Clover* is to emphasize the opposition between things as they are and things imagined; in short, to isolate poetry” (998). Again Stevens offers a challenging and potentially contradictory conception of how the poem relates to events “going on in the world”: in one sense he seeks “to isolate poetry,” or to show that “things as they are and things imagined” are not complimentary but rather in “opposition.” Yet Stevens’s interest in “what makes life intelligible and desirable” suggests that at least a minimal attachment to “life” remains in this effort “to isolate poetry,” even if this attachment is to a life “in the midst of great change and confusion.” In essence, “life” remains an integral factor in this equation, even though Stevens leans heavily toward the power of imaginative abstraction in this statement. In the later work of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens places these two terms, “things as they are and things imagined,” in greater balance, repeatedly considering the value of stripping away what has been imagined.

Stevens’s interest in reducing the accumulated layers of imaginative abstraction in his poetic voice does not end with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” Instead, we see this inclination fleshed out more fully in the shorter, sparser lyrics of *The Rock*, where Stevens continues to seek a “return / To a plain sense of things” (428), confronting the
potentially unsettling revelations which this return may uncover. Some of Stevens’s most stark and troubling moments in The Rock have their antecedents in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: for example, the first line of “The Rock”—“It is an illusion that we were ever alive” (445)—echoes Stevens’s despondency in “An Ordinary Evening” at mistakenly assuming that “life and death were ever physical.” Significantly, this same tone closes “An Ordinary Evening,” as Stevens is unable to reach any satisfying conclusion about the reality he seeks: “It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (417). Yet, as one might expect, Stevens is able to create poetry of great force and beauty in The Rock, even amid such stark reductions, for as Stevens concludes in “The Plain Sense of Things,” even “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (428).

1 The most influential works from this critical perspective are James Longenbach’s Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things and Alan Filreis’ Wallace Stevens and the Actual World and Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, The Thirties, and Literary Radicalism.

2 I have in mind here predominantly the works from Transport to Summer (1947) and The Auroras of Autumn (1950), although obviously many poems from other collections bear a significant resemblance to the work from this period. The shorter lyrics of The Rock signal an important shift in voice and therefore would represent a break from the two books that precede it. One could make a useful delineation of this late phase by beginning with “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (which was published separately during WWII before being placed at the end of Transport to Summer), moving through the significant works of Transport to Summer and The Auroras of Autumn, and ending with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” which is the third poem from the end in Auroras.

3 It is important to note that Lentricchia directs this statement toward the longer poems of Stevens’s later poetry in general, not toward “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” specifically. This evaluation, then, applies to “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” as well, which would be a point of significant disagreement between Lentricchia and Longenbach, for the latter finds “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” possessing significant political and historical implications. Although much of Longenbach’s
discussion of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is persuasive, particularly given the recent move toward contextual approaches in Stevens criticism, notable departures from this perspective can be found. For example, in her essay “Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of the Modernist Lyric,” Marjorie Perloff finds the Stevens of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” unable to resist the appeals of “the country of metaphor,” even when faced with “the daily headlines and radio bulletins” of World War II (42). Helen Vendler makes a similar claim when discussing the poem’s epilogue, finding its acknowledgment of world events at odds with the poetic and aesthetic focus of the rest of the poem (205). My point here, however, is not to enter this debate, but only to show that one of Longenbach’s best examples of Stevens as a politically and historically aware poet is not universally accepted, even for a poem written during the height of the war. As we move further on in the Stevens’s canon (despite its inclusion at the end of Transport to Summer, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” was actually published by itself prior to this collection) arguments for historical and political elements in the poetry become less common and more difficult to support.

Stevens goes on in the essay to distinguish between specifically “social” concerns and a poet’s broader response to reality. Stevens addresses “the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet”; his direct response: “He has none” (659). This assertion of poetry’s obligation to the reality in which the poet writes while disparaging any strictly “social” character in poetry resembles Williams’s comments on a similar topic. Williams addresses this issue in a lengthy letter written to Kay Boyle in 1932, a letter intended for publication in Contact II, one of the “little magazines” of the time. Here Williams struggles to articulate his desire for a culturally relevant poetic form distinct from the more obviously “social” work of that time. He argues that, when found, this “form” “will take its shape from the character of its age, not the ‘social’ character, if so positively, not satirically. It will not be the symptom of a chronic bellyache” (SL 129-130). Williams continues to push this distinction between the more narrowly “social” character of poetry and its more broadly formed qualities, which we can usefully identify as “cultural.” Williams wishes to “blast that occasionally pushing notion that the form of poetry (as that of any art) is social in character.” Instead, “the form of poetry” relates “to all art first, then to certain essential characteristics of language, to words then and finally to everything among all the categories of knowledge among which the social attributes of a time occur. The work of Einstein also merges into it, hardly a social phenomenon” (SL 130-1).

Blasing’s work posits a typological approach to the American poetic tradition based upon the “master tropes” of poetry: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These rhetorical classifications originate in classical sources, but Blasing aligns her work with the more recent uses of these terms by Kenneth Burke and Hayden White. She also acknowledges her work’s similarities to, and essential differences from, the critical-linguistic writings of Harold Bloom and Paul de Man (see the Introduction to American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms). De Man, for example, makes specific use of the metaphor-metonymy distinction in his discussion of Proust and reading in Allegories of Reading, and his terms bear a similarity to Blasing’s (due to the shared influence of
Roman Jakobson’s influential work on metaphor and metonymy). De Man finds the terms of Proust’s metaphors connected by a “necessary link” that is “natural, genetic, unbreakable,” which contrasts with “the contingency of a metonymy based only on the casual encounter of two entities” (62-3). In his essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man uses similar notions to distinguish between “symbol” and “allegory”: “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (BI 207). Essentially, de Man’s acknowledgement of the “difficulties characteristic of all attempts at establishing a taxonomy of tropes” (AR 63n) suggests his desire to maintain a flexible terminology for his discussions of a wide range of authors and works. For my purposes in this essay, however, a more limited conception of figural language is useful.

6 This association of the metonymic literary mode with realistic forms of language is discussed in depth by David Lodge, whose work arises out of Jakobson’s distinction between metaphor and metonymy as the fundamental modes of language use. This two-part conception of literary language distinguishes Lodge’s and Jakobson’s work from Blasing’s and its consideration of four “master” tropes. Nonetheless, the important distinctions between metaphor and metonymy in both Lodge’s and Blasing’s work are fundamentally the same.

7 From Wallace Stevens and the Actual World, page 222. In Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens, A. Walton Litz argues that the late long poems “do not derive their extraordinary consistency from an argument which builds toward a conclusion, but from the integrity of a presiding mind which rehearses again and again the premises and possibilities of an achieved vision” (287-8). Similarly, Lentricchia identifies Stevens in this late mode as a poet “whose place is at the painful brink of a consummation impossible to consummate” (145).

8 The two most extensive and astute readings of An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, by Bloom and Vendler, take alternate approaches to this question: Bloom’s reading moves through the poem sequentially, while Vendler organizes her discussion thematically and thus does not typically consider the sequence of cantos.

9 Stevens specifically discusses the roles of the poet and the philosopher in his essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.” He begins from the notion that philosophy appeals to “reason” and represents “the official view of being,” while poetry, by contrast, appeals to “the imagination” and represents only “an unofficial view of being” (667-8). But Stevens argues that poetry can be written to appeal to both reason and the imagination, thus rendering it “superior” to philosophy (668).
“THE PLANTING SHALL BE ON THE WIDEST POSSIBLE GROUND”:

PLACING THE POET IN CHARLES OLSON’S *THE MAXIMUS POEMS*

“…man… was suddenly possessed or repossessed of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality. It made a re-entry of or to the universe. Reality was without interruption, and we are still in the business of finding out how all action, and thought, have to be refounded.”

—Charles Olson, “Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself” (*CP* 121)

I.

Charles Olson’s comments about the changing nature of the relationship between “man” and the “universe” were initially directed toward the nineteenth century and the writings of Herman Melville. It was in Melville’s work that Olson found the first precedents for his concept of “projective or OPEN verse,” or a “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (*CP* 239), focused on “OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used” (*CP* 243). Olson’s interest in Melville was part of a large and complex project of challenging the subjective, ego-centered assumptions of Western thought, a project that Olson believed Melville had begun in the nineteenth century. In his essay “Projective Verse” Olson also invokes the term “objectism” to characterize this changing sense of an individual’s relationship to the world: “Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of
the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature […] and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object” (CP 247).

With The Maximus Poems Olson attempts to write an epic poem that would incorporate these notions of “objectism” and “composition by field”—a poem that, in essence, would put these ideas into practice as Olson attempted to construct a cultural epic in the immediate tradition of Pound’s Cantos and Williams’s Paterson. In terms of content, Olson’s epic does not greatly differ from its twentieth-century predecessors: he demonstrates the wide-ranging scope of cultural, mythical, and literary sources employed by Pound in The Cantos, and the focus on a particular, local site (in Olson’s case, Gloucester, Massachusetts) that Williams employed in Paterson. But it is the form that Olson wishes to employ, and his grand ambition to refigure our relation to the world through this “composition by field,” which make The Maximus Poems a unique step toward forging a viable epic poem that remains responsive to the local conditions of composition—in this case the conditions of Gloucester as Olson experienced them. This attention to form directly connects Olson’s project with Williams, who stated “FORM […] is the very matter itself of a culture.” This relationship was a reciprocal one, as Williams included a large excerpt from Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” (A 329-332) in his Autobiography—thus highlighting the continuity between Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Williams’s “field of action.” Most importantly, both poetic strategies advocate for a broadly democratic inclusiveness, whether in Williams’s desire for an “ill-assorted”
“profusion” that explicitly rejects the predetermined criteria and hierarchies of tradition, or in Olson’s desire to see humankind as another set of “objects” on equal footing with the other concrete objects of the physical world in the poet’s “field” of “composition.”

Olson’s desire to see the poet as another “object” in order to avoid the “lyrical interference […] of the ‘subject’ and his soul” raises the stakes for the role of the narrating voice in his epic, for it is through this voice that the poet assumes his role as instructor and expositor of some truth regarding his cultural conditions. To see the poet as another object puts Olson’s project at odds with romantic assumptions about the poet as seer or visionary. As Robert von Hallberg argues, Olson’s poetic approach is essentially “expository” rather than “expressive”; he envisions the poet as “more a teacher than a maker or a priest,” a teacher concerned with poetry that offers “explanation and understanding” (3).¹ Von Hallberg’s primary interest lies with Olson’s shorter poems prior to The Maximus Poems. As Olson embarks upon his cultural epic in the tradition of The Cantos and Paterson, this “expository” role remains prominent, in terms similar to my discussion of Paterson’s instructive aim. Toward this end Olson adopts the complex persona of Maximus, who is the accretion of numerous antecedents from sources in myth, literature, and Gloucester’s cultural history. In this chapter I would like to discuss the multifaceted nature of this poetic persona; how it functions in conveying the cultural reality that Olson experiences in Gloucester; how this persona develops over the course of The Maximus Poems; and how Olson’s changing conception of the relationship between the poetic persona of Maximus and the geographical focus of the poem challenges the coherence of his project.
The concept of the poetic voice as subjective and ego-centered becomes the focal point for Olson’s challenge to traditional Western thought and the relationship between poet, poem, and culture that this tradition engenders. The essential question for The Maximus Poems, then, becomes: how does the poet fit into the field of composition to assume his role as cultural explicator? The poem initially is not focused upon the subjectively construed perspective of the poetic voice; yet the title of this epic places Olson’s poetic persona, “Maximus,” squarely at the center of the work. The nature of this “Maximus,” then, establishes its difference from a traditional subjective or lyric voice: the way in which it encompasses a great variety of associations and allusions, from its apparent origin in Maximus of Tyre, a second century Greek eclectic philosopher (Butterick 5), up through numerous historical figures from Gloucester’s past, as well as many mythical figures and tropes as Olson’s focus becomes more mythical in the middle volumes of The Maximus Poems. Olson also gives the poem an essential geographical focus, the town of Gloucester. The interaction between these two entities—the persona of Maximus and the town of Gloucester—becomes crucial to the poem’s development, particularly as a tension arises between the privileging of each aspect of the sequence.²

Olson’s conceptual speculations regarding the nature of the epic poem he intended to write began with his consideration of Pound’s Cantos and Williams’s Paterson. Olson’s interest in an “objective” poetics, including an interest in the poem as “a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy discharge” that focuses on “the kinetics of the thing” (CP 239-40), puts his work in a line with Pound and Williams. In fact, during the ninety-forties and early fifties, as Olson was beginning his career as a poet, Williams published the whole of Paterson and Pound produced many of the
important later section of *The Cantos*, including *The Pisan Cantos*. Despite his affinities with their work, Olson did find shortcomings in both Pound’s and Williams’s attempts at writing the modern cultural epic. As part of an extensive correspondence with Robert Creeley, Olson discussed the inherent weaknesses he saw in Pound’s *Cantos* and Williams’s *Paterson*. He believed that in *The Cantos* Pound “solves problem [sic] by his ego” (*SW* 81), an approach Olson believed to be essentially at odds with his burgeoning commitments to an objective, “projective verse.” Pound’s approach had its benefits, though—Olson sees him creating a “space-field” in *The Cantos* that “has turned time into what we must now have, space & its live air” (*SW* 82).

Olson believed Williams offered an alternative in *Paterson*, centered not on the “ego” but on an “emotional system” (*SW* 82). But Williams’s approach failed to create the spatial scheme that Olson saw as Pound’s strength. Instead, Olson believed that, in *Paterson*, Williams “lets time roll him under,” and his “methodology […] contributes nothing” (*SW* 82-3) to Olson’s desire to achieve “composition by field.” Pound’s reliance on “ego” and Williams’s reliance on “emotion” (or what we might also reasonably call “imagination,” which was a term Williams used repeatedly) constitute “subjective” responses to the challenge of writing a modern epic. Yet, in spite of this indulgence of subjectivity, Olson is still able to take some lesson from each poet’s work, and he sums them up nicely (although perhaps too neatly) in his own words: “if i think EP gave any of us the methodological clue: THE RAG-BAG; bill gave us the lead on the LOCAL” (qtd. in Byrd 7).

This statement perhaps oversimplifies Olson’s indebtedness to these two precursors, suggesting that Olson takes Pound’s methodology and Williams’s topical
focus to form his own cultural poetics. But the lessons Olson learns from Pound and Williams play an important role in *The Maximus Poems*, particularly the way in which he attempts to synthesize Pound’s global cultural scope with the localized geographical focus of Williams’s work. Olson’s affinity with Pound’s wide-ranging cultural concerns can be seen in earlier projects of an epic scope that Olson had considered prior to beginning *The Maximus Poems*. As George F. Butterick explains, Olson had planned a long poem titled *West*, concerning “the entire Western World of which the American West was an imaginative and geographical culmination” (xx). After this project stalled, but still before beginning *The Maximus Poems* in the early fifties, Olson proposed another scholarly work to be titled *Red, White & Black*, which would explore the various and intertwined influences of native American, European, and African peoples in the cultural development of the American West (Butterick xxi-xxii).

Olson never made serious progress on either project, but they do highlight the poet’s interest in the notion of westward migration as it applied to various moments in Western culture, beginning with its classical origins and up to Olson’s present-day America. This interest also highlights Olson’s desire to engage with this extensive cultural history that reinforced the metaphysical assumptions from which he wished to break free. To extract oneself from so permeating a tradition may seem an impossibility, and, in the essay “Human Universe,” in a rare break from his typically assertive critical voice, Olson asks: “Can one restate man in any way to repossess him of his dynamic? I don’t know” (*CP* 160). But the rest of this essay, and others, constitutes a spirited effort to reveal the shortcomings of the “UNIVERSE of discourse,” derived from such classical legacies as Aristotle’s “logic and classification,” or Plato’s “world of Ideas” (*CP* 156), all
of which tend to abstract experience away from the “particularity” of any “thing” we encounter. Using language that further echoes that of Pound and Williams, Olson claims that “the thing itself” “is what we are confronted by, not the thing’s ‘class,’ any hierarchy, of quality or quantity” (CP 158).

II.

Olson’s persistence in engaging this Western cultural tradition, rather than seeking some distinct alternative, further highlights the “expository” role he sees for himself as poet. Olson chooses to engage with and challenge this cultural tradition because it is the context in which he and his audience find themselves. Thus, his consistent critiques of Western thought serve as exhortations and guidelines to his audience for how his work can best be understood. Olson’s persistent use of the notion of westward movement, of the migration of Greek and Phoenician culture west through the Mediterranean with Maximus of Tyre, and the European migration west across the Atlantic to America, takes this familiar trope and seeks to refigure it by revealing the experiences of those whose relationship with the world was a direct one and whose experience resisted the classifications and abstractions of the “universe of discourse.” These figures become enmeshed in the persona of Maximus: original European settlers to the region around Gloucester, such as John Smith; early figures in the development of Gloucester’s fishing and shipping trades, such as William Stevens, whom Olson believes may have been “the first Maximus” (M 35); fishermen whom Olson knew during his own time in Gloucester, such as Carl Olsen; and authors and literary figures, such as Pound and Odysseus.
This composite nature and mobility in the identity of Maximus finds its counterpoint in the fixity and rootedness of Gloucester, the sequence’s focal point in geographical “space.” This emphasis on a specific place marks a progression in Olson’s thinking from *Call Me Ishmael*, his first book, in which he praises Melville and his literary creation, Captain Ahab, for embodying an innate desire to engage the spatial reality of our world, then best exemplified by the great expanse of the Pacific. Olson’s conception of space and of the need to experience it at this point exudes a sense of adventure and discovery, of new spaces not seen before by Western man. With the composition of *The Maximus Poems*, this sense of exploration is replaced by a focus on the familiar and the known, on a place with which Olson was familiar and whose details he had studied and experienced. In *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson drew a distinction between Melville and Poe in their response to the fact of space: “Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a tent stake to survive. As I see it Poe dug in and Melville mounted. They are the alternatives” (*CMI* 12).

Olson’s shift by the time of *The Maximus Poems* is significant, for in essence he has eschewed the Melvillean option of “mounting” and “riding” space and instead chooses to dig in to a locality, to allow himself the chance to know such a place in detail. This shift from Melville to Poe also increases Olson’s affinity with Williams, since at the end of *In the American Grain* Poe becomes Williams’s representative American poet for his efforts to “dig in” to his local surroundings. Olson uses this metaphor of digging elsewhere, again in terms that echo Williams, such as in “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn”: “Best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man* until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Barbed
As Olson’s own comments reveal, the ideas and writings of Williams played an important part in this shift to the local, particularly Olson’s experience reading *Paterson*.

What this focus on the local also suggests is Olson’s fulfillment of his own argument for the privileging of “particularity” over “the inherited formulations [that] set aside nature as an unadmitted or suppressed third party” (*CP* 160). At times Olson’s own arguments and ideas can feel distanced from their objective focus by an abstraction in terms, such as his constant use of “space” or “space-field.” Such terms can suggest a distance from the immediacy of the objects themselves that are Olson’s concern. Only when he moves beyond such schematic abstractions and into the “physicality” of immediate details does he seem to meet his own criteria for breaking through the “universe of discourse.” *The Maximus Poems’* focus on Gloucester, on a single, particular place rather than the abstract concept of space itself, helps the sequence to value this immediacy and physicality and to conceive of the poet’s “relation to nature” (*CP* 247) in as truthful a fashion as possible, which includes an emphasis on the “breathing” and “human voice” of the poet (*CP* 239, 248).

The early poems of Olson’s sequence explore the potential contrast between the composite nature and migratory motion inherent in the poetic persona of Maximus and the fixity of the sequence’s focus on Gloucester. In these early poems Olson establishes the interrelations of these two potentially contradictory concepts and their coexistence within the field of the poem. In the sequence’s first poem, *I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You*, we first approach the city from a swooping, bird-like perspective, moving over the
roofs of the town and taking stock of what can be seen—a movement that also suggests the arrival of Maximus from the Phoenician city of Tyre, who now becomes “Maximus of Gloucester”: 

And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! flight
   of the bird
   o kylix, o
   Antony of Padua
   sweep low, o bless

the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks
of my city! (M 5)

The sight of ship’s masts from the city has multiple significations, drawing a connection between the ships of Gloucester—from the town’s original European settlement to Olson’s own time—and the impressive sailing technology utilized by the Phoenicians during their long history.

As the sequence develops, this sense of travel and migration arises alongside the rootedness of Gloucester. This connection reveals Olson’s initial ability to stay focused on the local, “to dig one place,” while also conveying the varied influences that came and went to this location and made important contributions to the town’s identity. Olson conveys this sense of stability in the sequence’s second poem, *Maximus, to Gloucester*, as he praises the statue atop the Church of Our Lady of Good Voyage:
[...] it’s the doctor knows
what the parents don’t know. Or the wife doesn’t,
of the husband, or the husband, of the other. Sins,

they still call them, and let
pejorocracy thrive. Only the lady

has got it straight. She looks
as the best of my people look
in one direction, her direction […] (M 10)

Here Olson contrasts the stability of Our Lady with the declining state of the
townspeople, represented as “pejorocracy,” a term borrowed from Pound and literally
meaning “worse rule” (Butterick 13), which will be a recurring theme for Olson.

Frequently in these early poems the current state of Gloucester’s, and by extension
America’s, cultural reality comes under fire from Olson for being distracted by
materialism and consumerism from the true nature of the culture around them: “But that
which matters…that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where, where shall you
listen / when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?” (M 6).

These sorts of distractions from the contemporary world of Gloucester pose a
recurring problem to the potential for the cultural present to be understood properly. As
illustration, Olson presents examples of an artificial or misguided understanding of the
local. One such example comes from Olson’s friend Vincent Ferrini, a fellow writer
living in Gloucester who founded a new literary magazine, Four Winds. In the third poem
of The Maximus Poems Olson defends Ferrini after his magazine had received a negative
review. With “Letter 5,” however, Olson takes his friend to task for publishing sub-
standard work and for failing to grasp the proper connection between this work and the
local conditions of Gloucester. Olson acknowledges to Ferrini that the previous issue had
been “sillily reviewed,” but not “as sillily as you now show yourself / bringing such an issue as this / into the public domain” (M 22). Olson contrasts Ferrini’s incompetence with the work of a successful local fisherman, Carl Olsen, captain of the boat the Raymonde, who demonstrates an exceptional understanding of the physicality of where he works:

    it was to walk the streets of Gloucester different
to have a sight aboard the Raymonde

            As you should walk it,
        had you done your job (M 23)

Olson fears that Ferrini’s magazine will never be successful “if it is not as good as fish is / as knowing as a halibut knows its grounds (as Olsen knows / those grounds)” (M 23). Olson’s tone even becomes taunting toward Ferrini: “I’ll put care where you are, on those streets I know as well as (or better: / I have the advantage / I was a letter carrier” (M 26; a reference to Olson’s temporary work as a postman, which was also his father’s profession). In this poem Olson offers another example of an artificial attention to the local, although this time the fraud is intentional:

    The C & R Construction Company
 had hired us Gloucester help
because the contract read “local”

    and fired us, after 12 hours,
 had tricked the city’s lawyers,
 had covered, by one day’s cash,
 the letter of the law… (M 25)

    In “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn” Olson further develops this notion that a focus on the local can be misconstrued. As he writes emphatically: “THE LOCAL AND THE SENTIMENTAL IS HOW HUMANISM COMES HOME TO ROOST IN
AMERICA” (CP 299). Such sentimentalizing on local and regional qualities can distract from a true experience of the contemporary moment in all the glories of its authentic objectivity. But the focus on the local, when applied properly, is still the path to follow. As Olson says later in the essay: “TRANSFER TO LOCAL,” which will offer an experience of “the intimate connection between person-as-continuation-of-millenia-by-acts-of-imagination-as-arising-directly-from-fierce-penetration-of-all-past-persons, places, things and actions-as-data (objects)—not by fiction to fiction: our own ‘life’ is too serious a concern for us to be parlayed forward by literary antecedence” (CP 301). Not surprisingly, Olson then identifies his approach of “fierce-penetration” into objective experience as a counter to the prevailing modes of Western thought: “…one could expose a fallacy here which has dominated all living—literally—since the 5th century BC, when, for the first time, that unhappy consciousness of ‘history’—and which consciousness begets ‘culture’ (art as taste, inherited forms, Mr. Eliot—indeed, Mister Pound as he preaches the ‘grrrate books’) came into existence” (CP 301).

In addition to seeing the need to dig deeply into “persons, places, things and actions,” Olson places the agency for this activity within the individual. He recommends the historical methodology of “’istorin,” or “to find out for oneself,” as a means of grasping “social, or national, or ‘cultural,’ or ‘intellectual’” ideas and events (CP 308). These statements begin to provide a clearer sense of Olson’s notion of a cultural poetics (even if he may have been wary of the implications of the term “cultural”). A localized focus is essential for a poetics truly responsive to the conditions of experience. But this localized focus must be properly rooted in an integral experience of the objective world; it must not be subsumed by a misguided concern with “literary antecedence” or the
historical consciousness demonstrated by Eliot and Pound. Again the terms with which Olson describes his poetics are strongly democratic, as he seeks to privilege the individual ability usefully to apprehend experience. And Olson provides examples of such individuals at work: Carl Olsen, the fisherman, or Howard Blackburn, another celebrated Gloucester fisherman; or the seventeenth-century carpenter and shipbuilder, William Stevens, perhaps “the first Maximus”; or, of course, the persona of Maximus himself. But often this ability is not used properly, as seen by the work of Ferrini, or the townspeople, still bogged down in conceptions of “sin,” which allow “pejorocracy [to] thrive.”

Olson further explores this notion of individual agency by introducing the notion of “polis,” the Greek concept of a city or community. Olson often maintains the democratic spirit of his approach to achieving true experiential understanding, connecting one’s participation within the polis with the act of seeing: “polis is eyes” (M 30). By the end of the poem Olson expands upon this democratizing potential in seeing properly: “There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only / eyes in all heads / to be looked out of” (M 33). This emphasis on vision resonates with Olson’s earlier description of the statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage, with her ability to “look in one direction,” to see “straight”; it also extends Olson’s efforts to distance his work from the “inherited forms” and “grrrrate books” of Eliot and Pound and further aligns his project with Williams’s. However, the potential to misuse or misunderstand this power of vision is present, too: “where Ferrini, as so many, / go wrong / so few/ have the polis / in
their eye” (M 32). In the third poem of the sequence, Olson explores a similar possibility of failure, particularly as it affects his ability to convey his message to an audience (particularly a local one):

I speak to any of you, not to you all, not to you as citizens as my Tyrian might have. Polis now is a few, is a coherence not even yet new (the island of this city is a mainland now of who? who can say who are citizens?

Only a man or a girl who hear a word and that word meant to mean not a single thing the least more than what it does mean (not at all to sell any one anything, to keep them anywhere, not even in this rare place  (M 15)

Here the problem of failed vision does not only lead to the failure of the individual to see properly, to see “no hierarchies,” but it also constrains Olson’s attempt to convey his understanding to an audience, or to fulfill his role as expositor and teacher. Only “a few” are properly able to perform their roles as a true part of the polis, “a man or girl” who are able to understand Olson’s message properly. Thus, like Williams in Paterson, Olson’s project and its democratic aspirations struggle with an audience either unable or unwilling to comprehend the guidance that Olson/Maximus offers.

As Olson develops his emphasis on seeing as part of a true experience of one’s local conditions, he also introduces the work of mapmaking as being a corollary to this ability to see properly and earn a place in the polis. Olson first considers the initial European efforts to map America and the oceans surrounding it by Christopher Columbus’ cartographer, Juan de la Cosa, in the poem On first looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes. Olson discusses the necessity of la Cosa’s efforts to achieve a
wholeness of vision, a worldly vision: “But before la Cosa, nobody / could have / a mappemunde” (M 81). The title of this poem suggests the possibility of adopting the vision of others, who have seen the world properly (whether la Cosa or Olson/Maximus), in order to see it properly ourselves. Later in the sequence Olson begins to extend the act of mapmaking to include his own efforts in The Maximus Poems. In Letter, May 2, 1959, Olson attempts to map the local features of Gloucester into his poem—not with sketches of roads or buildings, but with the actual lines of poetry themselves. The poem begins with a more typical, discursive discussion of directions and distances: “125 paces Grove Street / fr E end of Oak Grove cemetery / to major turn NW of / road” (M 150). But as the poem continues, Olson begins to arrange the poetic lines on the page to reflect the physical geography that the lines describe. So descriptors like “Babson house,” “Meeting House Green,” “Marsh Street,” or “old stonewall” (M 150) are deliberately spaced along the page to approximate their relative locations in physical space. Again this move highlights Olson’s role as expositor, and the way in which what he’s describing is not of value only to him but potentially to those who will read this work. The spacing of this poem, or its cartographic element, aids the reader in the act of seeing properly (or at least in seeing as Maximus does). Previously Olson could not say with certainty “who are citizens,” but he now attempts to assist those who aspire to be a part of the polis, as well as set an example for them.7

Olson intersperses among these examples of proper seeing and mapping further indications of the deleterious and pervasive effects of the “pejorocracy,” particularly in the possessive and materialistic appropriations of local resources. If Olson believed that the means of achieving a true experience was “to dig one thing or place or man until you
yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man,” then the act of possessing and controlling things or places (or men) suggests a perversion of the original intention: “but that the car doesn’t, that no moving thing moves / without that song I’d void my ear of, the musicracket / of all ownership” (M 18). This “racket” of “ownership,” from Olson’s perspective, corrupts both those at the mercy of the owners as well as the owners themselves. Olson describes one of his experiences as a renter:

was such a man
he was embarassed
to ask for the rent

was only a house-owner
because the punks,
and cops, had driven him
out of up-town

he was that straight. (M 94)

Only those who are able to use their profits to further some valuable endeavor are able to avoid this corruption. Olson offers such an example from, not surprisingly, the local fishing community. After his observation that “so few / have the polis / in their eye,” Olson continues: “The brilliant Portuguese owners, / they do. They pour the money back / into engines, into their ships, / whole families do, put it back / in” (M 32). Olson locates the pervasiveness of the “pejorocracy,” of meaningless profiteering and ownership, as a part of America’s cultural development, and thus the context out of which he and others like him must necessarily work. Olson offers another example of a nineteenth-century Boston trader who also served on the controlling board of Harvard: “He represents, then, that movement of NE monies / away from primary production & trade / to the several cankers of profit making” (M 76). In the broad context of my
discussion, this passage also brings into focus Olson’s distance from Stevens, a New England insurance executive (and one-time Harvard student) who made a comfortable living “away from primary production.” Olson surely did not intend any allusion to Stevens here, which is in fact the point: Stevens’s heavily subjective considerations of the relationship between poet and physical world, particularly in his earlier work, maintain the primacy of the individual mind in its encounters with what is outside of itself. Thus, Stevens’s work remained consistently entrenched within “the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” that Olson wished to interrogate and ultimately dismiss, and his interests were more effectively served by positioning his work alongside, and against, those poets who demonstrated a similar inclination.

In a later poem of volume one Olson identifies these profit-driven economic conditions as an integral part of America’s development and a product of the belatedness of those who followed the original European settlers:

\[
[...] \text{one’s forced, considering America, to a single truth: the newness}
\]

\[
\text{the first men knew was almost from the start dirtied by second comers… (M 138-9)}
\]

Faced with such conditions, Olson concludes that “no one / knew better / than to cash in on it” (M 139). Olson spends a significant amount of time in the first volume of The Maximus Poems discussing a specific, localized example of such misguided appropriations of early American resources: a dispute among early Massachusetts settlers over rights to the fishing grounds off of Cape Ann (the eventual location of Gloucester). Apparently the Plymouth settlers had built a “fishing stage” in the area but then left. The
next year, “the Plymouth men returned to find that Westcountry fishermen / had
preempted it; and Miles Standish was sent for, to fight about / it” (M 103-4). Olson later
elaborates on the situation:

What we have in this field in these scraps among these fishermen,
and they Plymouth men, is more than the fight of one colony with
another, it is the whole engagement against (1) mercantilism
(cf. the Westcountry men and Sir Edward Coke against the Crown,
in Commons, these same years—against Gorges); and (2) against
nascent capitalism except as it stays the individual adventurer
and the worker on share—against all sliding statism, ownership
getting in to, the community as, Chambers of Commerce, or theocracy;
or City Manager (M 105)

III.

Like the pervasive emphasis on the subject and the ego in Western thought, the
conditions of pejorocracy in which Olson finds himself are also deeply entrenched
legacies of historical and cultural development. Throughout the first volume (of three
total) of The Maximus Poems, Olson both decries the impoverished state of
contemporary life, the “pejorocracy,” and outlines the means by which Maximus and
others may transcend this pejorocracy and achieve a valid understanding of the world in
which they live. But these two activities are not clearly delineated; there is not a clear
diagnosis and then prescription. Instead, the diagnosis is part of the prescriptive
process—part of Olson’s efforts to dig deep to know the place, to penetrate “all-past-
persons, places, things and actions-as-data (objects).” As this activity is performed,
cultural or experiential understanding begins to take shape, demonstrating Olson’s
commitment to “process as the most interesting fact” (CP 298), as he explains in his
“Bibliography on America.” After all, as Olson states later in the same work,
“METHODOLOGY is a science of HOW” (CP 302). The complicated construction of The Maximus Poems may not work toward decisive conclusions or resolutions, but the sequence struggles toward a heightened understanding of all the elements that contribute to one’s reality, as well as an understanding of how the individual can best function within that matrix of “persons, places, things and actions.” Olson describes his goal as such in a letter to Frances Boldereff, written during his work on this first volume of The Maximus Poems: “I guess these Maximus letters’—this poem—is the attempt to come to grips with this country which plagues us all, to try to run it down” (qtd. In Butterick xxxvi).

Yet Olson’s “process” in The Maximus Poems does not reveal cultural understanding to be as elusive as it was for Williams in Paterson. Olson offers more clearly delineated characterizations of the problems that face his cultural moment as well as the potential means of addressing them. The people that appear in The Maximus Poems also more clearly reflect a particular challenge to the community or a specific way of addressing such challenges than many of the figures in Paterson. There remains a similarity, however, if not of degree but of kind, between these two projects in the way in which the achievement of cultural understanding does become a deferral, a point toward which Olson/Maximus struggles in The Maximus Poems but which cannot be definitively expressed. To say this condition is a necessary part of the “process” (whether Olson calls it “istorin,” or “objectism,” or composing by field), and that the process itself is the true state of culture, seems unsatisfactory. Olson’s broad project is to offer an alternative conception of reality to the commonly held assumptions of Western thought. Olson’s work serves to demonstrate the way to achieve fuller understanding of our world through
such a refigured conception of how we come to know that world. But do we see Olson clearly achieving this greater understanding? Again, the distinction between diagnosing the problems of traditional Western thought and prescribing a solution to these problems is blurry in *The Maximus Poems*. But there is a sense that this struggle toward understanding can be transformative—that the struggle to articulate a refigured reality can form a viable “polis,” or community, which could then serve as the foundation for this new understanding (or a new sense of culture, to use a word that Olson likely would not use).

Yet, as this achievement continues to be deferred, Olson’s conception of Maximus and his role in these poems become more diffuse, particularly in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*. During the first volume the poetic persona of Maximus develops and expands to absorb a number of historical figures, events, and ideas into its constitution. Despite the variety of these sources, the Maximus persona maintains a coherence in relation to the articulated goals for the poem: Olson’s effort to “dig one place,” to penetrate “all-past-persons, places, things and actions,” and to “find out for oneself” how all of these elements contribute to one’s contemporary reality. All of the various characters and events depicted in this first volume, despite their heterogeneity, coalesce around the cultural milieu that fostered the development of Gloucester. Some examples demonstrate the misguided ideals and actions associated with this development; others demonstrate individuals acting in accord with the principles and values that Olson has espoused. But they all are held together by the persona of Maximus and his desire to dig deeply and to understand the nature of Gloucester’s cultural history and contemporary moment.
With the second volume of poems Olson begins to expand his project beyond the already diverse “persons, places, things and actions” of volume one. The cover image for this second volume conveys the changing scope: Olson uses an image of a prehistoric earth with the continents massed together before they began to drift apart over tens of millions of years. This image conveys the closeness that Olson hopes to revive between distant points of the earth in this volume of *The Maximus Poems*, particularly the greater proximity between the eventual site of Tyre and that of Gloucester. It also extends the historical scope of Olson’s project, reaching back through historical time into geological time. From this perspective time essentially becomes irrelevant, and instead what matters for measuring time is space—the movement of the continents across the planet.

Obviously, what such an image suggests adheres closely to Olson’s desire to replace time with space as part of his dismantling of the core of Western thought. But this broadening of scope in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* detracts from the coherence that Olson had managed to maintain among the diverse ideas presented in the first volume. The element that held those ideas together, that gave them a coherence, was the geographical site of Gloucester and its accompanying cultural milieu. The persona of Maximus plays a crucial role in amalgamating these sources as well, but in this first volume its role seems secondary to that of Gloucester as local, physical space—a hierarchy validated by Olson’s explanation of his refigured sense of the world and its emphasis on “space” over the “ego.” But early in volume two Olson outlines the changes occurring in fairly explicit terms:
that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
to change
Polis
is this (M 185)

Olson places the power of the individual self above that of “geography” and Gloucester, a move that obviously seems to stray toward the error for which Olson found Pound guilty: solving problems by his ego.

Many readers of The Maximus Poems have discussed this shift toward a more personal conception of the poem, with Olson assuming the voice of bard or prophet. But what is crucial about this shift for my discussion is its move away from the primary focus on the locality of Gloucester. Instead, the poetic voice assumes primacy in organizing the diverse materials of the sequence; the persona of Maximus becomes the crucial element that validates the sequence’s range of materials. The materials and sources used in volume two reflect this change from a geographical to a personal organizational scheme, particularly with the growing use of archetypal images and languge, as in the following passage:

[...] the Vertical American Thing will show from heaven the Ladder
come down to the Earth of Us All, the Many who know
there is One!
One Mother
One Son
One Daughter
and Each the Father
of Him-Her-Self:

the Genetic
is Ma the Morphic
is Pa the City is Mother-

Polis, the Child-Made-Man-Woman is (M 179)

These archetypal images shift the focus of the poem away from its objective, physical sense validated by the town of Gloucester; instead, these images feel abstract, distanced from the objective sensibility that permeated volume one of *The Maximus Poems*. Olson’s mythical sources also become more diverse in the second volume, encompassing myths from ancient civilizations, whose relevance to the development of Gloucester becomes tenuous. Even the introduction of Algonquin legends into the field of sources, which offers a direct connection to the region’s culture prior to its European colonization, becomes problematic with its sexist and misogynistic characterizations. The value of such sources for Olson’s audience becomes questionable at best; for example, one of the Algonquin legends involves a deceptive, venomous woman who kills her husbands while having sex with them. Olson expands on these legends in one of his poems: “They said she went off fucking every Sunday. / Only she said she walked straight through / the mountain, and who fucked her was the spirit / of that mountain” (M 192). These native American sources also offer a potential line of connection between Olson and Williams and Crane before him, as both of those poets considered such native cultural sources to be exemplary of a life lived in closer accord with one’s immediate surroundings. Instead,
Olson’s Algonquin examples indicate an exhaustion of this potential connection: his limited interest in what these sources can offer suggests an insurmountable distance between Olson’s position and the cultures that existed in the region centuries earlier.

Don Byrd answers such criticisms of the poem’s development by arguing that the disparity between elements of the sequence are only based on traditional stratifications: “In the *Maximus* […] John Burke, the Gloucester councilman and Ptah, the Memphite lord of creation, are equally political and mythic. One of Olson’s most significant acts in the *Maximus* is to restore the city, and so politics, to its myths” (xii-xiii). But the increasingly broad scope of materials in *The Maximus Poems* are no longer “restored” to a coherence of “city,” “politics,” and “myth,” because the poem continues to move away from the organizational focus of the town of Gloucester. Instead, Olson’s poetic voice begins to assume this central role, as he is able to “compell Gloucester / to yield” and “to change.” The mythic and archetypal sources that proliferate in volume two are validated by this force of will in the poetic voice of the poem, not by their essential connection to the cultural facts of Gloucester. Such a shift seems an essential denial of the original conception of the poem that Olson had articulated prior to and during its composition.

This changing conception of the poem also suggests a shift in the relationship between the poem and its audience. Olson’s “process” or “methodology” is intended to serve as an instructional example to his readers for how they can better understand the reality of their experience, outside of the classifications and abstractions of traditional Western thinking. Recasting the persona of Maximus as the central focus of the poem changes the example being set: instead of learning from Maximus’ interactions with, and attempts to understand, his locality, readers are now presented with Maximus’ efforts to
understand his own potential. Again, this shift recasts the emphasis of the poem from an individual among other “persons, places, things and actions,” or other objects in the field of composition, to the individual essentially abstracted from such a context. This struggle with his work’s instructive role, as well as the response of turning toward a more subjective poetic voice, places Olson in a line with Williams in the later books of *Paterson*: both poets seem confined by the parameters that they had initially set for their respective projects. Their responses, surprisingly, are akin to the problem that Olson had previously identified in Pound’s *Cantos*: each poet tries, in a sense, to “solve [the] problem by his ego.” The passages cited above also reveal Olson’s changing conception of the polis or community, which also qualifies his project’s democratic aspirations.

“Polis is” now the ability of Maximus to “compell Gloucester / to yield, to / change”; or it is constituted by mythical and psychological archetypes, “the Child-Made-Man-Woman,” seemingly abstracted from the physicality of experience. These changing conceptions of the polis undermine the democratic qualities with which Olson had imbued volume one, when the ability to take part in the polis was equated with the act of seeing correctly, for “there are only / eyes in all heads / to be looked out of.” As volume two proceeds, it seems that the most important eyes “to be looked out of” belong to Maximus.

It is important to note, however, that several poems throughout volume two seem to return to the poetic approach consistently revealed in the first volume, such as the poem that returns to Herodatus’ notion of history as “finding out for yourself;” and Alfred North Whitehead’s attempts to “clear […] out the gunk” of Cartesian abstractions “by getting the universe in” to poetics (*M* 249). But volume two also continues to incorporate sources whose connection to Gloucester becomes more difficult to construe:
Egyptian, Norse, and Greek mythologies, as well as the continuing pervasiveness of archetypal symbols. Later in this volume Olson provides a brief, two-line poem, which reads almost as an indictment: “my memory is / the history of time” (M 256).

Conceptions of “history” and “time” that see these two terms as inextricably linked were part of the tradition against which Olson was working, as he sought to substitute his objective, spatial sense of history and experience. But volume two often feels like an exploration of the “memory” of Maximus, and this emphasis on an individual or subjective element detracts from the immediacy that the poem had achieved in its first volume.

IV.

In volume three Olson begins to draw back from the expansiveness and diffusion of volume two, although without making a complete return to the approach of volume one. Volume three of The Maximus Poems nearly equals the combined length of volumes one and two, and it shows a similar variation in themes and approaches. But volume three does move away from the more archetypal and abstract elements of volume two, while still incorporating a more personalized voice. The first poem of this volume signals this move back to a focus on the material and political conditions of experience: “having descried the nation / to write a Republic / in gloom on Watch-House Point” (M 377). The fifth poem of this volume reiterates this emphasis on the physical rootedness of the poem’s topics, even when those topics are metaphysical in nature: “I believe in God / as fully physical” (M 381). Many of the poems in volume three demonstrate this concerted effort to refocus on the “physical” reality of the local, again drawing the tone of the larger
sequence away from the abstractions of volume two. For example, another early poem of volume three reveals this renewed interest in the physical details of Gloucester’s landscape:

Main Street
is deserted, the hills
are bull-dozed
away. The River alone,
and Stage Fort Park
where the Merrimac
once emptied under the ice
to the Banks survive

And on the Polls
at the edge

where the rocks are soft
from the scales

and in the heat-edges
grass and thorny

bushes
are I idle

overlooking creation (M 383)

Such poems in volume three that focus on physical details also frequently possess a personalized poetic voice, as in the passage cited above (“I idle // overlooking / creation”). Importantly, though, this personal, subjective voice in volume three has lost the pretensions of volume two, particularly the hubris to span eons of time and continents of space. Of course, this voice in volume three still seems at odds with Olson’s desires to remove “the lyrical interface of the individual as ego.” But the reduced scope of this
personalized voice makes it more viable to see the poetic persona of Maximus as another object among other “persons, places, things and actions,” rather than the object that forces other elements of the field “to yield” and “to change.”

At times Olson’s voice in volume three suggests a continuity with a romantic poetic tradition, which indicates a further change in the conception of the poet’s relationship to the world in which he lives. These poems offer an individual speaker, alone among a natural setting, seeking insight from his surroundings. For example, in the poem “December 22,” Olson examines the coastal landscape to seek any “lesson” it may hold:

[...] the whole
full landscape a
Buddhist
message, Japanese
Buddhism and maybe,
behind it, exactly in these tightened coves, Chinese
Buddhism, fullness and
pertinax, sharp drawn
lesson, the rocks
melting
into the sea, the forests,
behind, transparent
from the light snow [...] (M 482)

In the poem “COLE’S ISLAND,” these residual romantic markings are again prominent. In this instance the ironic tone to the poetic voice is even reminiscent of Frost, suggesting a late romantic sensibility, and the long poetic line suggests a more traditional idiom:

I met Death—he was a sportsman—on Cole’s Island. He was a property-owner. Or maybe Cole’s Island, was his. I don’t know. The point was I was there, walking, and—as it often is, in the woods—a stranger, suddenly
showing up, makes the very thing you were doing no longer the same. That is suddenly what you thought, when you were alone, and doing what you were doing, changes because someone else shows up […] My impression is we did—that is, Death and myself, regard each other. And there wasn’t anything more than that, only that he had appeared, and we did recognize each other—or I did, him, and he seemed to have no question about my presence there, even though I was uncomfortable. (M 436)

The long, fluid lines, the colloquial tone, and the standard syntactical structures in this poem reveal Olson’s desire at least to consider the potential of such an idiom, no matter how much ironic distance he may try to employ. Within a post-romantic tradition, this arrangement of the poet seeking insight from a natural setting both highlights the importance of the individual self for perceiving insight, as well as the inferiority of the individual in the face of some transcendent power. This paradox is analogous to the initial role of the Maximus persona: it is at once of great importance to the sequence (and gives the poems their name), but also becomes dwarfed at times among the great flux of objects—historical events, mythological sources, cultural figures, that constitutes the poems’ field. *The Maximus Poems* do not become a romantic sequence in any definitive way; the context created by the previous volumes of the sequence make this element of the poems only a part of a greater heterogeneity. But these moments do bring *The Maximus Poems* back to a position that resembles their initial scheme, in which the relationship between the poetic voice (Maximus) and its locality (Gloucester) generated the crucial interplay of the poem.

A pivotal moment in this still developing conception of the poetic voice occurs in the poem “Maximus, in Gloucester Sunday, LXV,” the fifty-fourth poem of volume three
(which places it about a third of the way through this volume). The poem begins with comments about some of Gloucester’s early settlers: “Osmond Dutch, and John Gallop”; “Reverend John White”; and “Abraham Robinson” (M 449). As the poem continues, it describes Olson returning to Gloucester after an absence and not knowing many of his fellow townspeople. Instead he feels a greater kinship with the historical figures that interest him:

…it is Osman (or Osmund) Dutch’s name, and Gallop whom I am closest to, it turns out, once more drawn into the plague of my own unsatisfying possible identity as denominal Charles Olson add here as 4’s on a weather shingle our names

Charles Olson
Osmund Dutch
John Gallop
Abraham Robinson, our names (written 28
Stage Fort Avenue Gloucester
August 22nd 1965 (M 450)

The poem’s title begins with the name of Maximus, but that name falls away to reveal the poet’s own name, “Charles Olson.” This moment suggests the dissolution of the complex persona of Maximus that Olson had developed through the many dozens of poems that constitute The Maximus Poems up to this point. This self-revealing moment represents a culmination of Olson’s changing conception of how his poetic voice fits into the poem, as well as its relation to the locality of Gloucester. Olson requests that his name be placed along with others “on a weather shingle” in Gloucester, thus emphasizing the connections between these persons and the continued development of the town. This move also places Olson among the historical figures of the poem rather than Maximus. The figure of
Maximus does not disappear entirely from the rest of the sequence, but it appears with less frequency. And many of the remaining poems maintain a personal tone, often sounding like excerpts from a journal and including the dates of when they were written. For example, the following passage comes from a poem that ends with the date “Sunday January 9 1966”:

The whole thing has run so fast away it breaks my heart
Winter’s brilliance with the sun new-made from living south
I also re-arisen another numbered year from December’s threat. Love all new within me ready too to go abroad. Ice snow my car as hidden as a hut beneath it children passing without even notice, every house so likewise interesting because of snow upon each roof. (M 483)

As volume three approaches its end, Olson offers the following comments on the necessities of migration:

Migration in fact (which is probably as constant in history as any one thing: migration

is the pursuit by animals, plants & men of a suitable —and gods as well—& preferable

environment; and leads always to a new center. (M 565)

Olson’s insistence on the necessity of migration suggests one way to understand the changing conceptions of The Maximus Poems, particularly in terms of the poetic persona of Maximus. Olson’s project seeks out a “preferable environment” and “a new center” away from the traditional schema of western thought, and he appears to find that “new center” in Gloucester, particularly in the first volume of Maximus Poems. But this imperative toward migration also moves Olson away from the seemingly conducive environs of Gloucester’s cultural history and toward a diffuse, abstracted preoccupation with the universality of myths and archetypes in volume two. In essence, this shift
suggests Olson’s desire to be both Melville and Poe, to “ride […] space” and at the same time “dig in” to a locality. Volume three’s refocused attention on the geographical site of Gloucester does not signal a return to the approach of volume one. It does, however, more closely approximate the emphasis that had been placed on the local as the “center” of this epic poem, only now with the poetic voice somewhat reduced from the ambitiousness of Maximus to the more personal considerations of Olson himself. And as in the first volume, the relationship between poetic voice and geographic locality in volume three places a greater emphasis on the local, for it is Gloucester that carries the accumulations of culture that the poem seeks to understand.

1 See also Susan Vanderborg’s essay “‘Who Can Say Who Are Citizens?’: Causal Mythology in Charles Olson’s Polis.”

2 Burton Hatlen discusses what he sees as an “ambivalence as to the primacy of place over person or person over place” (245) in The Maximus Poems. Hatlen goes on to compare Olson’s poetic conception of place with those of Edward Dorn and Theodore Enslin.

3 This relationship between Olson and Pound and Williams is discussed in greater detail in Don Byrd’s Charles Olson’s Maximus, and Robert von Hallberg’s Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art.

4 For a specific discussion of Olson’s dependence on the language and concepts of Pound and Williams, see Marjorie Perloff’s essay “Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited.”

5 For a further discussion of Olson’s metaphor of digging, see Ross 96-8.

6 For further discussion of Olson’s desire for a “natural,” unmediated expression in his poetry and the linguistic issues involved, see Andrew Ross’s The Failure of Modernism; for an extended discussion that contextualizes this desire within the American poetic tradition, see Stephen Fredman’s The Grounding of American Poetry.
Von Hallberg discusses this move by Olson in *The Maximus Poems* toward fulfilling his role as teacher by serving as an example to those who will read this work. “*The Maximus Poems* began as a project with didactic ambitions, and Olson’s early statements of poetic theory defined a rhetorical poetics. But the poem and the theory became in the late fifties and sixties less didactic than heuristic; it becomes less important what *The Maximus Poems* are about, and more important that Maximus is finding his way, and really only his way, through a welter of information” (41). Von Hallberg sees Olson becoming more Whitmanesque, “teaching by example rather than precept” (42); or as Whitman says in a passage that Von Hallberg cites from *Leaves of Grass*, “We convince by our presence.”

Olson originally published what we now consider Volume Two of *The Maximus Poems* as volumes IV, V, and VI. However, his next installment was called Volume Three, so for clarity many of his critics and commentators have adopted the three volume distinctions.
CHAPTER 5

“WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?”: LOCATING ELIZABETH BISHOP’S POETRY OF PLACE

I.

Despite their vast stylistic differences, Elizabeth Bishop and Charles Olson—the two chronologically “postmodern” poets in this study—share an important similarity: both chose to live in places outside of the literary and cultural mainstream in America, which helped them to position themselves as “outsiders,” or original voices, not fully involved in the trends and debates of the literary establishment. This geographical isolation assists each poet in developing an independent voice with a unique set of influences not beholden to the trends of their era. Details from Olson’s poetry and letters suggest an often isolated and solitary existence during his years spent in Gloucester, Massachusetts, particularly after his very active teaching and administrative duties at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. But in simple geographic terms, Bishop’s choice of residence surpasses Olson’s for being at a far remove from the focal point of the American literary establishment. She spent several years in the late thirties and early
forties living in Key West, Florida, and then spent most of the fifties and sixties living in Brazil. This geographic reality provided an impetus to Bishop’s great output of correspondence, most often with friends and fellow writers in the United States.

Bishop’s distance from the American poetry scene, however, was not spurred by an intense desire to write in a revolutionary or avant-garde style, as it was in many ways for Olson. Bishop’s was certainly a unique and powerful poetic voice, and one more subversive than initially understood by her readers, but she did not have the grand ambitions of Olson to refigure the course of Western thought through poetry. Bishop’s poetry and prose writings were well received during the course of her career; she received many of the most prestigious American poetry prizes during her lifetime (the Pulitzer, a National Book Award, the chair in poetry at the Library of Congress, among others) and was admired and celebrated by many of her contemporaries. Thus, Bishop’s geographical isolation from America’s cultural center did not preclude her from succeeding in the established literary context of modern poetry. Instead, her situation suggests a relationship to the literary establishment that is uniquely liberating but at the same time not wholly dismissive of traditional conceptions of literary and cultural authority.

Bishop’s context bears important similarities to Stevens’s career: his professional isolation provided him with the financial independence to resist the pressures of the literary mainstream while also writing work that would later gain professional and critical acceptance from the literary establishment. The unique space that Bishop creates for herself as a poet allows her to succeed within the confines of the literary mainstream, while often writing poetry that challenges or subverts specific values of the mainstream
literary trends. Thus, like the other poets in this study, Bishop seeks to place herself as a poet deserving of the cultural capital afforded by tradition while also attempting to revise certain assumptions inherent in that tradition.

Not surprisingly, Bishop’s poetry shows a frequent concern with questions of place—a concern that reveals not only her experience of living outside of her home country but also the sense of dislocation brought on by her childhood, when she was orphaned and alternated between living with her maternal and paternal grandparents. The titles of three of Bishop’s four books of poetry reveal this concern: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*. But of greatest concern to Bishop is the perspective from which she can know and experience particular places. Her work constantly explores the political implications inherent in *knowing* the places and objects that she puts under observation, particularly the ways in which coming to know something may mean that the observer is exercising power over what is observed.¹

Thus, Bishop’s work repeatedly focuses on the details of observation and the intricacies of knowledge, particularly through an individualized perspective—whether that of a specific persona or a subjective, lyrical voice. Bishop’s work does not reveal the willingness to move from a localized, individual perspective toward an understanding of collective experience that was prevalent in the work of Crane, Williams, and Olson. In this sense Bishop’s work is closer to that of Stevens, revealing a detailed concern with the intricate exchange between subject and object, or between the individual consciousness and the reality that it encounters. For Bishop the question becomes: how do we achieve a real sense of connection with any place, a sense of knowing the place and understanding the cultural and historical factors that help to define it? Bishop’s frequent concern with
this question of the connection between a person and place, along with her frequent desire to revisit her childhood experiences in her poetry and prose, suggest that the genesis of these concerns lies in the sense of dislocation she experienced as a child and which continued to affect her as an adult who lived for many years outside of her country of origin. Further, for Bishop, any considerations of the broader cultural and historical factors inherent in questions of place are always grounded in the immediate, concrete details of an individual experience, because it is at this localized, individual level that her own identification with a particular cultural locale becomes uncertain.

This attentiveness to the intimate details of experience and its implication for achieving a broader cultural understanding develop over the course of Bishop’s work. In her first two collections, *North & South* and *A Cold Spring* (published in 1946 and 1955, respectively), we can see Bishop’s early concerns with the intricacies of concrete experience and the challenges of incorporating individual experiences into the broader realms of cultural and historical knowledge. In her later collections *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*, as well as in her prose writings from the same period (roughly the mid-fifties through the seventies), Bishop continues to develop her responses to these questions of immediacy and culture through a greater consideration of their connections with local spaces, particularly in terms of her relationship to Brazil, her country of residence for nearly two decades, as well as her recollected relationship to the places of her youth, Nova Scotia and New England. Throughout these works Bishop continues to investigate the process by which one becomes part of a community and comes to feel a connection with a place. In her poems about Brazil, as well as the poems written during this time about her childhood, Bishop considers the experiences of many different people,
both as subject of her observation and as narrative voices in these poems. Ultimately the sum of this work leads Bishop to conclude that the means by which one comes to understand a particular place, as well as the historical and cultural elements that contribute to what can be known of that place, are always contingent upon the specific context in which that experience occurs. Again and again Bishop’s approach to larger questions of cultural import becomes more narrowly focused on her own concrete experiences or the experiences of those around her.

This narrowing of scope makes Bishop’s work an appropriate final chapter in this study. Thus far we have seen three poets—Crane, Williams, and Olson—who attempted to expand their focus on the material text and the immediacy it conveys to encompass a cultural work of epic scope. Yet each poet finds that this pursuit of grander ambitions raises nearly insurmountable challenges—Crane’s struggle to move coherently toward the visionary culmination of The Bridge (which he had written first); Williams’s uncertainty about successfully communicating his cultural program to its intended audience; Olson’s difficulties in reconciling his sequence’s geographical focus with its increasingly protean persona—so that by the end of these works Crane, Williams, and Olson must modify the initial goals of their respective epics. Bishop’s work at times shows a similar interest in widening the scope of her work from immediate, concrete details to broad cultural and historical concerns. Yet her work as a whole continually finds this progression tenuous, as if she were aware of the failures of her twentieth-century predecessors. Bishop’s more narrow focus in questions of knowledge, place, and culture, as well as her unwillingness to expand this focus in the hopes of arriving at broad, overarching answers, highlight her connection with Stevens: both poets seek to
understand the intricate terms of experience and knowledge as a way of forging a stability in their encounters with the people, places, and objects of the world. Only from this stability, then, do they attempt to extend their insights into a broader historical or cultural discourse.

Critical accounts of Bishop’s interest in the politics of observation have attempted, over the last twenty years, to read a broad progressive agenda into Bishop’s work. One of the first pieces in this trend is Adrienne Rich’s essay of 1983, “The Eye of the Outsider,” which examines Bishop’s “experience of outsiderhood, closely—though not exclusively—linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity”; Rich also examines “how the outsider’s eye enables Bishop to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them” (127). A later essay by James Longenbach takes this interest a step further, identifying Bishop’s “social conscience” and crediting her as “an exposé of racism and sexism” (479). The problem with these assessments is the easy conflation they make among various hierarchies of power—hierarchies based on knowledge (the outsider vs. insider); gender (female poet vs. predominantly male literary establishment); sexuality (homosexual desires vs. heterosexual cultural norms); class (poor farmers and villagers vs. institutions of privilege and power); and race (indigenous peoples vs. European colonizers). All of these issues, of course, do arise in Bishop’s work with varying frequency and are afforded varying degrees of scrutiny. But to employ a broad interpretive framework that repeatedly aligns Bishop with the dispossessed side of each binary denies the complexity inherent in her work; Bishop’s own deliberate and studied approach to questions of power in her poetry undermine any readings that posit such an unmistakable agenda. Bishop’s position as partner of a wealthy landowner in
Brazil, Lota de Macedo Soares, as well as the numerous remarks of derision in her correspondence toward those who worked for her, and toward native Brazilians in general, at the very least complicate any attempts in her poetry “to identify” with the outsiders of Brazil. Instead, Bishop’s work constantly explores questions of knowing and intimacy, between persons and between persons and places, and she consistently finds that the terms of such knowledge are always limited by the particulars of that specific encounter.

II.

Bishop establishes her concern with issues of geography and place not only with the title of her first book of poetry, *North & South*, but also with the first poem of that collection, “The Map.” This poem introduces several of the ideas that will occupy Bishop throughout her career, all of which form a nexus around the central act of observation. In the first stanza, Bishop playfully introduces her concern with accuracy in observation and her willingness to reconsider what may initially appear true: “Land lies in water; it is shadowed green” (3), reads the poem’s first line. By the fifth line, however, Bishop entertains a potential revision of her initial premise: “Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, / drawing it unperturbed around itself?” (3). Not only is Bishop interrogating the details of her observation of the land and the sea, but she also draws attention to the manner in which the maker of this map chose to convey his or her observations. Bishop’s question of how best to describe the intersection of land and sea seems applicable both to a direct observation of a coastal scene as well as an inspection of the contours of a map, as is the case in this poem. Bishop continues to play with this
question of how geographical features are represented, and by whom, in the final stanza:

“Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? /—What suits the character or
the native waters best. / Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West” (3).
The second line of this passage, ostensibly a response to the previous question, could just
as easily be a question on its own: What color does suit the character of a country or the
native waters best? By what criteria are such choices made? Bishop’s poem raises
questions about the connection between geographical details and the collective attempts
to make sense of them, in this case by dividing them into countries. For Bishop there is
no clear answer to how these geographical and cultural elements could most effectively
or accurately intersect. Yet she does indicate the terms that her inquiry will take, as she
initially applies her focus to the intricate details of what she observes: the intersection of
land and water. Only later in the poem does she inject these details into a broader cultural
context.³

*North & South* also provides interesting examples of Bishop’s early attempts to
invest her work with a cultural scope that reaches beyond her individual experience,
particularly in the poems “Jeronimo’s House,” “The Monument,” “A Miracle for
Breakfast,” and “Roosters.” The latter two poems represent Bishop’s most political
forays in her first collection. “A Miracle for Breakfast,” first published in *Poetry* in July
of 1937 (Wyllie xix),⁴ with its lines of people “waiting for coffee and the charitable
crumb […] from a certain balcony, /—like kings of old” (18), responds to the economic
conditions brought on by the Great Depression.⁵ But the poem also reveals the challenge
of meaningfully addressing such a cultural reality, particularly through poetry. The poem’s complex imagery and sestina form develop to a fantastical conclusion, as the poem’s speaker effects an imaginative transformation of the conditions of poverty:

   My crumb
   my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
   through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
   working stone. Every day, in the sun,
   at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
   with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee. (19)

The role that nature plays in this process of transformation (“insects, birds, and the river”) implies the traditional literary divide between nature and political realities, thus further highlighting the challenge of addressing such conditions through poetry. What this poem offers is only an imaginative change, assisted by nature, rather than any suggestive or instructive move toward political change. And this poetic change moves the poem away from any potential to offer a realistic expression of the conditions of the time. Instead, the formal complexity of the sestina keeps the poet at a remove from the cultural conditions of the Great Depression. Bishop’s comments in her correspondence about this poem suggest the challenge of moving beyond the poem’s formal elements and toward the reality that it attempts to assert, for Bishop’s comments are only of a formal nature, discussing word choices and the general challenges of the sestina form. This does not mean, of course, that Bishop was primarily concerned with the formal rather than the thematic elements of the poem, but it does suggest the challenge of manipulating such complex formal elements in such a way as to convey most emphatically the cultural realities to which the poem refers.
In contrast, Bishop’s discussion of her war poem “Roosters” with Marianne Moore demonstrates a more forceful concern with the poem’s thematic thrust in addition to its formal elements. Prior to the poem’s publication in *The New Republic* in 1941, Bishop wrote to Moore to respond to Moore’s comments regarding the poem. Apparently Moore’s comments were successful in persuading Bishop not to capitalize the first word of each line. However, in terms of other suggestions from Moore—such as omitting “water-closet” and the repetition of “gun-metal” from the poem—Bishop holds her ground and justifies doing so with an appeal to her thematic aim in the poem: “to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism” (*OA* 96). Part of Bishop’s inspiration comes from the military build-up and its effects on local life in Key West, Florida, where Bishop had lived for several years. She also cites as inspiration “those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over,” as well as “the violent roosters Picasso did in connection with his *Guernica* picture” (*OA* 96).

Bishop identifies the first part of the poem as being particularly inspired by the situations around her in Key West, and her descriptions of the roosters’ violent agitations possess a directness that conveys the immediacy of her experience in Key West: “Deep from protruding chests / in green-gold medals dressed, / planned to command and terrorize the rest” (35). The second part of the poem, however, pushes further the symbolism of the rooster, delving into the rooster’s presence in St. Peter’s denial of Jesus and the way in which the significance of the rooster comes to be transformed: “Poor Peter, heart sick, // still cannot guess / those cock-a-doodles yet might bless, / his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness” (38). This second part of the poem may seem imaginatively richer and more complex as it further explores the potential meaning of
rooster as symbol. Yet one senses that a certain immediacy has been lost, compared with
the first part of the poem, particularly as it relates to the specific experience that inspired
Bishop’s poem. This potential tension between imaginative complexity and the directness
of presentation is reminiscent of “A Miracle for Breakfast” and its complex use of form
and imagery to convey Bishop’s sense of the Great Depression.

These comments are not meant to suggest that direct statement is the only way in
which political observations can be made; the medium in question is poetry, after all, not
newspaper editorials. But I believe these qualities suggest Bishop’s frequent
apprehensiveness about overt political engagement,7 which can often be seen in the
remarks she makes in her correspondence, such as with the following comment in 1938:
“I’m reading Emma Goldman, etc., and have just about decided to sign up with the
Anarchists […] Why not join me? It’s marvelous—all you have to do, apparently, is read
Emerson’s Essays, Whitman, and other equally dated and unpleasant works, and advocate
‘free love’” (OA 75). But when this apprehensiveness is overcome, as with the first part
of “Roosters,” Bishop’s work moves towards an effective engagement with the
immediate conditions of her local surroundings, in this instance in Key West. But
“Roosters” also explores the pitfalls of such a connection between persons and place,
with the belligerent roosters “each screaming, ‘This is where I live!’” (36). The roosters’
relationship to their locality is one of aggression and control, as they “mark […] out maps
like Rand McNally’s” (36), eliciting this question in the poem:

[…] what right have you to give
commands and tell us how to live,
cry “Here!” and “Here!”
and wake us here where are
unwanted love, conceit and war? (36)

Bishop shows that the attempt to know one’s location, one’s “here,” can be undone by the pressures of collective consensus, particularly when those trying to impose a consensus have the malignant motivation of Bishop’s roosters. Simply experiencing a place independently, and attempting to know the immediate, concrete details of that experience, are undone by those who wish to fit these experiences into their own patterns of understanding.

The poem “The Monument” conveys a similar experience. The first speaker of the poem attempts to render the precise details of observing this wooden monument:

Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.
Each is turned half-way round so that
its corners point toward the sides
of the one below and the angles alternate. (23)

But a second voice enters the poem to interrogate the first speaker, and this second voice desires to see the monument in some broader context:

“Why does that strange sea make no sound?
Is it because we’re far away?
Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,
or in Mongolia?”

An ancient promontory,
an ancient principality whose artist-prince
might have wanted to build a monument
to mark a tomb or boundary, or make
a melancholy romantic scene of it… (23-4)

The first speaker’s response to her interlocutor has a tone of exasperation, as she tries to put the monument into as traditional and accessible a context as she can, presumably in
the hopes of satisfying a question that does not interest her. As Margaret Dickie points out, Bishop makes several references in *North & South* to the memorials of war (104-9), and with “The Monument” being published in 1939 it seems that Bishop wishes to resist any such implications for this monument while at the same time acknowledging the inevitable impulse that many feel to put such an object into a larger cultural context. Her concern in this poem with placing the concrete details of a particular experience (her observation of “the monument”) into a cultural context is that the details will lose their vital importance—an attitude conveyed by the meddling second speaker, who wants only to know how this object can take on a meaning beyond its immediate details. Thus, in these three poems—“A Miracle for Breakfast,” “Roosters,” and “The Monument”—we see Bishop exploring the contours of a poetics that can be responsive to cultural contexts (the Great Depression, World War II) while remaining rooted in the immediate details of experience. Not only can the intricacies of poetic form limit the immediacy of the experience conveyed (such as in “A Miracle for Breakfast”), but the focus on one’s experience of a local place can come into conflict with the efforts of others to incorporate the experience of that place into an ideological framework.

The poem “Jeronimo’s House” constitutes a further response to these issues, particularly in relation to “A Miracle for Breakfast” and “Roosters.” If both of those poems reveal a potential tension between formal concerns and the realities that the poems seek to convey, “Jeronimo’s House” shows Bishop seeking a more intimate connection with her poetic subject. In the poem Bishop attempts to convey the conditions of the impoverished Cubans living in and around Key West, and to do so she writes the poem from the first-person perspective of Jeronimo. The poem attempts to show the wealth of
possessions that can accumulate in such a small, seemingly dilapidated house, such as the “veranda / of wooden lace”; the “little / center table / of woven wicker”; “four blue chairs”; “two palm-leaf fans / and a calendar”; and “an old French horn / repainted with / aluminum paint” (34). In addition to this keen sense of observation, Bishop endows Jeronimo with the power of imaginative transformation, seen in his descriptions of this house: “My house, my fairy / palace”; “My home, my love-nest” (34). This poem’s speaker also has the agency to address those who may be observing his house and correct the failures of their vision:

At night you’d think
my house abandoned.
Come closer. You
can see and hear
the writing-paper
lines of light
and the voices of
my radio
singing flamencos
in between
the lottery numbers.
When I move
I take these things,
not much more, from
my shelter from
the hurricane. (34)

Thus, in this instance Bishop demonstrates a desire to connect with an “outsider” who falls within her scope of observation. Of course, such a strategy risks the implications of exploitation or appropriation, with the comfortably middle-class poet assuming the voice of the marginalized immigrant. And one could reasonably point out that this adopted voice sounds peculiarly like Bishop’s, with its penchant for detailed observation. Yet in
the context of *North & South*, the move being made is significant, despite the possibility of appropriating Jeronimo’s marginalized voice, as Bishop seeks a way of more genuinely conveying the outsider’s experience.

This potential course of action will become significant to Bishop’s later work as she continues to struggle with similar questions: how can one most effectively and authentically gain knowledge of what one observes, and can it be done without assuming mastery over what is observed? And how can this knowledge contribute to one’s potential connection with a particular place, as well as with the people, values, and ways of life that constitute that place’s culture? For Bishop, these initial, basic questions must first be answered to her satisfaction before making the move into larger questions of culture and history. Compared with the epic ambitions of Crane, Williams, and Olson, Bishop’s stance may initially seem apprehensive; yet in light of the struggles that these other three poets encountered in their epic projects, Bishop’s poetic approach instead appears subtly calculated and effectively thorough in its progression toward cultural insight.

III.

Bishop continues to explore these questions of observation, knowledge, and power in her second collection, *A Cold Spring*, and she does so most insightfully in the poems “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” and “At the Fishhouses.” In general terms, these two poems offer different conceptions of how an individual experience of place intersects with broader historical and cultural contexts. In “Concordance” Bishop struggles to separate her experience from the cultural precedents
with which she is familiar, while in “Fishhouses” Bishop presents a personal experience whose concrete, physical details allow the experience to resist absorption into a broader historical register. These two examples become vital precedents for the explorations of place that become even more prominent in her final two collections, *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*.

The title of “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” as well as its first lines, initially put the poem’s priority on those experiences transmitted through traditional texts:

Thus should have been our travels:
Serious, engravable.
The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
innumerable, though equally sad and still,
are foreign. (57)

Bishop initially seems mastered by the precedents of the Bible and other “serious” books, seeing them as the expression of what her experiences “should” be. Also, her descriptions of the scenes from these books become inflected with the materiality of the texts, with “the specks of birds / suspended on invisible threads above the Site, / or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads” (57). The patterns of the images on the page suggest some kind of order behind them, “God’s spreading fingerprint” (57), something to give a structure and a meaning to the scenes observed.

But Bishop wonders how her own experiences of these biblical and historical places can approach this “serious” and “engravable” quality, especially those places that remain “foreign.” As Bishop describes her own travels in the poem’s second section, this “foreign” element becomes crucial, not only for Bishop’s experience but also for the
traditional frameworks in which these locations are seen. The locations that Bishop mentions—“the Narrows at St. Johns” (57), Canada’s easternmost city; “Dingle harbor” (58) in Ireland; Mexico; “Volubilis” and “Marrakesh” (58) in Morocco—are all sites of exploration and colonization by dominant European powers. Thus, these locations are designated as “foreign” not simply because they are distant or unknown from the dominant European perspective, but because they are sites of colonization where their “foreignness” or distinctness from the dominant culture plays an essential role in the colonizing process. However, only limited generalizations can be drawn from the experience of European settlement in these various locations: Canada, Ireland, Mexico, and Morocco achieved varying degrees of separation from their colonial powers at varying points in history. But Bishop does imply this notion of historical “foreignness” with an “Englishwoman” she encounters in Ireland:

In Dingle harbor a golden length of evening
the rotting hulks held up their dripping plush.
The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us
that the Duchess was going to have a baby. (58)

This subtext of foreign occupation is further supported by a letter that Bishop wrote to Moore after traveling in Morocco. This letter describes specific scenes from Marrakesh that would later appear in “Concordance,” specifically “the little pockmarked prostitutes / [who] balanced their tea-trays on their heads / and did their belly-dances” (58). But Bishop begins her descriptions in this letter with another kind of comment: “Morocco was so nice—in spite of Moorish architecture, which is so awful, and the rather
unfriendly atmosphere which has been caused by the French occupation (one immediately sympathizes with the Moors)” (OA 40). (Is this final comment a pun on the name of her correspondent—“Moore” and “Moors”?)

These allusions to foreign occupation suggest the potential of the poem to present an inclusive, even liberating perspective on how these locations have traditionally been characterized. Yet Bishop’s concern with the French occupation cannot be found in the poem, and these implicit suggestions of the way colonizing powers subject these “foreign” spaces remain deeply submerged in the poem. Instead Bishop’s primary concern remains the effort of the traditional texts to influence and categorize the details of what she encountered, and any potential identification with the concerns of the colonized subjects stays at a further remove from her experience. In the poem Bishop describes the encounter that “frightened [her] most of all: / A holy grave, not looking particularly holy” (58). What appears to be most disturbing is the failure of her experience to correspond with the traditional cultural expectations associated with these places, or the failure of this grave to appear sufficiently holy. Bishop’s subtle allusions to the repressive work in which these texts participate are not enough to break free from the cultural norms that these texts enforce, and in the poem’s final section she is still left with the same gap between text and individual experience:

Everything only connected by “and” and “and.”
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen this old Nativity while we were at it? (58)

In essence, because the cultural precedents that are Bishop’s primary concern so influence and distort her experience, she is unable to explore in any meaningful way the
implications of the poem’s subtle subtext of repressive power. Instead the poem returns to the issue that concerned it from the start: the power with which these culturally authoritative texts attempt to impose their conceptions on an individual’s experience. Thus, Bishop still wonders why she could not “see” the ancient holy land in the way that it is depicted in the Bible. Significantly, this textual authority still offers the appeals of the materiality of the text: “The gilt rubs off the edges / of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.” This preoccupation with textual precedents does not allow Bishop to look for connections between her experience and that of the people who call these places home. The effort to identify with the “outsider” in a poem like “Jeronimo’s House” cannot find adequate expression in “Concordance,” despite indications—her earlier comment about the French occupation in Morocco, the presence of the Englishwoman in Ireland discussing aristocratic affairs—that such a move might be relevant to Bishop’s experience. Instead, any concern with how repressive power affects the culture of these places becomes secondary to how Bishop’s own cultural background influences the terms of her individual experience as foreign traveler and observer. In other words, Bishop remains locked in a struggle with her cultural context in the poem and cannot fully explore the lives of those outside of this context, leaving any liberating potential in the poem unfulfilled.

If “Concordance” shows Bishop unable to conceive of an encounter with a specific place outside of traditional cultural terms, then “At the Fishhouses” offers an experience of place in which the immediate, concrete details of that experience are able to resist the influence of a broader historical or cultural context. Bishop explains the autobiographical and fictional elements of the poem in a letter shortly after the
publication of *A Cold Spring*: “Quite a few lines of ‘At the Fishhouses’ came to me in a dream, and the scene—which was real enough, I’d recently been there—but the old man and the conversation, etc., were all in a latter dream” (*OA* 308). The reality of the scene places it somewhere in Nova Scotia, where Bishop lived as a child with her maternal grandparents. Unlike the scenes of travel in “Concordance,” whose significance Bishop struggled to reconcile within a cultural framework and instead were “only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and,’” the setting of “At the Fishhouses” suggests a more personal, intimate experience characterized by its concrete, physical details: “The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water” (64). And whereas Bishop finds herself mastered by the influence of Biblical precedents in “Concordance,” she is able to comically dismiss any religious significance in “At the Fishhouses” with her encounter with a “curious” “seal”:

One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”
He stood up in the water and regarded me steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment. (65)

Even this seal, a seeming “believer” in the “total immersion” of baptism, finds Bishop’s allusions to a specific religious doctrine “against his better judgment.”
As Bishop further examines the “cold dark deep and absolutely clear” (65) sea water, it begins to take on a greater significance, for it becomes “like what we imagine knowledge to be.” But this experience of insight is firmly rooted in the physical terms of immediate contact:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, icily free above the stones, above the stones and then the world. If you should dip your hand in, your wrist would ache immediately, your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn as if the water were a transmutation of fire that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame. If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, then briny, then surely burn your tongue. (65-6)

The earlier ironic allusion to a religious context diminishes the religious significance of describing the water as a “transmutation of fire.” Instead it suggests a more generally metaphysical or transcendental significance not beholden to any specific religious framework. Just as Bishop’s experience is free from abstract religious concepts, so too is the water “icily free […] above the stones and then the world,” making it more amenable to an individual moment of awareness. And Bishop experiences the water directly through vision, touch, and taste to arrive at this moment of heightened awareness. However, Bishop shows caution in articulating the specifics of this experience: her encounter with the water is not “knowledge,” and not “what we imagine knowledge to be,” but rather “It is like what we imagine knowledge to be” (my emphases). These qualifications emphasize Bishop’s distance from Williams and his dictum “no ideas but in things”: she has the “thing,” but refuses to invest the “idea” with the integrity and concreteness that Williams sought. Instead, Bishop’s description reveals her cautiousness
in articulating the specifics of any greater significance inherent in her experience; it also reinforces the general challenge of expressing her experience in terms that reach beyond the immediate details of that experience. Yet Bishop does conclude the poem with a further description of this “knowledge”:

\[
\text{dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,} \\
\text{drawn from the cold hard mouth} \\
\text{of the world, derived from the rocky breasts} \\
\text{forever, flowing and drawn, and since} \\
\text{our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (66)}
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Bishop’s experience, like the water that inspires it, is “utterly free,” not beholden to any larger cultural concepts. Yet Bishop acknowledges that such an experience cannot be fully divorced from any context and recognizes that “our knowledge is historical.” But the fluid nature of this “historical” “knowledge”—“flowing and drawn,” “flowing, and flown”—suggests a mutability to any broader context, which allows the immediate, concrete details of Bishop’s experience to remain intact.

Thus, “At the Fishhouses” offers a different kind of experience of place in comparison to “Concordance”: in “At the Fishhouses” the specter of cultural precedents does not master Bishop’s experience or the terms in which she can recount it. Instead, her “knowledge” of the place remains intact, grounded in the immediate, concrete details of what she encountered. If these two poems represent Bishop’s musings on how fully one can know a particular place, then it is essential to note Bishop’s distinct relationships to the places in each poem. “Concordance” concerns distant places to which Bishop traveled as a tourist; her experience with these places was essentially limited to these travels and the traditional precedents with which she was familiar. “At the Fishhouses” concerns a scene from Nova Scotia familiar to Bishop since her childhood (this was the home of
Bishop’s maternal grandparents, with whom she lived for part of her childhood with her mother and after her mother’s institutionalization. Bishop highlights this personal connection in the poem by identifying the fisherman in the scene as “as friend of my grandfather” (64). This difference in locations becomes crucial to Bishop’s examination of how one comes to know a place and feel a connection with it: such an understanding is extremely difficult to achieve among the foreign locales of “Concordance,” but it becomes more feasible in a familiar location like Nova Scotia.

Yet it is worth reiterating that Bishop’s moment of awareness or “knowledge” in “At the Fishhouses” still possesses a degree of uncertainty: it “is like what we imagine knowledge to be.” This uncertainty reflects the conditions of Bishop’s residence in Nova Scotia, which was interrupted by her move to Massachusetts to live with her more affluent paternal grandparents. Bishop describes this move in her prose piece “The Country Mouse”: “I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism” (17). This move from Nova Scotia to Massachusetts complicated Bishop’s identification with either place, particularly when she was required to pledge allegiance to the American flag in school. After having learned “God Save the King” and “The Maple Leaf Forever” in her Canadian school, Bishop recalls that “I felt like a traitor” (26). This sense of exile grew under the influence of Bishop’s patriotic American grandmother, who insisted that the young Elizabeth memorize every stanza of “The Star Spangled Banner” (26-7).

Bishop’s recollection of these circumstances suggests a distaste toward the traditional patriotism that many people employ to identify with their home country. And
in more general terms, the itinerancy of Bishop’s childhood, as well as her recollections of those years, imply a broad skepticism on Bishop’s part toward cultivating a true understanding of one’s connection to a particular place. Nonetheless, Bishop’s considerations of this possible connection in “Concordance” and “At the Fishhouses” reveal that the most effective way to approach an understanding of place is through one’s intimate, concrete experiences of that place. Further, the essential terms in which Bishop constitutes this relationship in these two poems—observer as tourist and observer as resident—play an important role as Bishop continues to examine the intersections of poetry and place.

IV.

The poems of Bishop’s third book, *Questions of Travel*, were predominantly written during the nearly two decades that she lived in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop’s final collection, *Geography III*, was written during the seventies and published in 1976, when Bishop spent much of her time back in the United States after Soares’ death. Together both collections continue to explore the intersections of place, observation, power, and knowledge that had been Bishop’s concern in her previous work. Further, she specifically returns to the two conceptions of observer as tourist and observer as resident that interested her in “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” and “At the Fishhouses,” applying these conceptions to her experience in Brazil and modifying them accordingly. Broadly speaking, Bishop never fully penetrates the barriers that prevent her “outsider” perspective in Brazil from more closely resembling the perspective of one who resides there and knows the place more intimately. Instead,
Bishop achieves this knowing, intimate engagement with place by writing about her recollections of childhood while living in Brazil. As Bishop puts it in a letter written in 1952, early in her stay in Brazil: “It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia—geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even” (OA 249).

The primary factor that prevents Bishop from identifying more closely with the people and culture of Brazil is the barrier of class that informs her experience. Bishop’s life in Brazil was one of luxury, specifically her life with Macedo Soares, a member of a prominent Brazilian family. Bishop acknowledges this fact in her letter to Kit and Ilse Barker that contains the previous comment about her “total recall” of her childhood: “I’ll quote from my geography book: ‘During the summer months the wealthier people (that’s me) of Rio de Janeiro seek the lower temperature (9 degrees) and the more active social life of the community of Petrópolis’ […] I like it so much that I keep thinking I have died and gone to heaven, completely undeservedly” (OA 249). The distance between Bishop’s privileged life and the lower classes of Brazil becomes most obvious in her correspondence, as her comments about the Brazilian poor consistently identify their “savage” and “primitive” nature and their failures when working as servants for Bishop and Macedo Soares (e.g., in a letter from 1954: “Sometimes one gets awfully tired of primitive people, I must confess” [OA 290]). Renée R. Curry discusses these frequent comments in Bishop’s correspondence more extensively and with an eye toward identifying the assumptions of “whiteness” inherent in Bishop’s poetry.

Of course, such comments severely qualify any efforts on Bishop’s part to identify with the poor of Brazil in her poetry, and, in general, her comments complicate
her previous efforts to identify with the lower classes in works like “A Miracle for Breakfast” and “Jeronimo’s House,” as well as the geographically dispossessed in “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance.” Bishop’s correspondence suggests, at the least, that any interest in knowing or understanding the poor (or identifying with their “outsiderhood”) is mitigated by her privileged position of wealth—a position about which she is largely uncritical. But what proves interesting in her poetry about Brazil is the fact that several poems do concern Brazil’s lower classes, which Bishop observes with varying degrees of criticism and sympathy. What also proves interesting is the almost complete absence from the poetry of any of Bishop’s peers from Brazil’s cultural elite. Essentially all of the moments of real identification with and knowledge of a particular place and its way of life occur in the poems about Bishop’s childhood, not those concerning Brazil. In these works about Brazil Bishop is never able, or never willing, to move from her original position as tourist or visitor toward that of a resident, or one who knows the place in which she resides, and this failure severely curtails the liberating potential that was evident in Bishop’s earlier considerations of place.

The first part of Questions of Travel is titled “Brazil,” and the first three poems of this section explore Bishop’s initial reactions to her arrival in Brazil. In the first poem, “Arrival at Santos,” Bishop explicitly addresses her role as tourist to this new country, as well as the obstacles that this role presents toward her desire to acquire knowledge of the place. Bishop demonstrates her uncertainty about how to characterize what she observes in the poem’s first stanza:
Here is a coast; here is a harbor;  
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:  
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,  
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,  
with a little church on top of one. (89)

Bishop then connects this uncertainty with her status as tourist, as one hoping for a  
location that would lead to understanding and connection between observer and place:

Oh, tourist,  
is this how this country is going to answer you  
and your immodest demands for a different world,  
and a better life, and complete comprehension  
of both at last […] (89)

Bishop’s desire for “complete comprehension” encompasses both life and location, or the  
“better life” that she seeks as well as where she would like to live it. From the start, then,  
Bishop’s sense of her life and its possibilities are intricately entwined with this “different  
world” at which she has arrived—or, life is inextricably linked with place, a conclusion  
that Bishop has reached by way of her previous poetry.

In the second poem of this collection, “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” Bishop adds an  
historical perspective to her “arrival at Santos,” suggesting a parallel between her role as  
tourist and the role of the Portuguese explorers of the early sixteenth century. Despite the  
difference of four and a half centuries, Bishop believes that “Nature greets our eyes /  
extactly as she must have greeted theirs: / every square inch filling in with foliage” (91).  
Whereas in “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” Bishop struggled  
with the disconnection between her observations and previous European, colonialist  
perspectives, here she sees no noticeable difference between the two encounters with  
Brazilian nature. The specific quality of this colonialist perspective with which Bishop is
most concerned is the artificial, fabricated feeling of the natural surroundings. She observes “big symbolic birds” and describes the flowers as “solid but airy; fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame” (91). Later, when the Portuguese move into the land, “each out to catch an Indian for himself,” they must “rip […] away into the hanging fabric” (92). The poem suggests that this unreal quality is what makes it possible for the Portuguese colonists to perpetrate violence and barbarism against this foreign land and its people—even though, Bishop suggests, the scene was “not unfamiliar” (92) to them. Bishop finds the scene before her similarly unreal, but her full reaction to these new surroundings is deferred. This acknowledgment of the similarities between her position and that of the first European colonists indicates a sensitivity on Bishop’s part to the potentially repressive and dominating impulse latent in her position of privilege. Yet Bishop never finds a meaningful way around the unreality that Brazil presents, and in a sense the country will remain inscrutable to her.

The poem “Questions of Travel” finds Bishop still struggling to make sense of her new country, as well as the motives that brought her there. In the final two stanzas, italicized and placed in quotation marks, Bishop asks: “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?” (94). This concern with “imagined places” further emphasizes Bishop’s sense that this new place is unreal and, perhaps, unknowable. She again addresses this inscrutability when she wonders why she is moved “To stare at some inexplicable old stonework, / inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view” (93). Bishop’s interest has consistently been to gain some understanding of
the concrete details of the objects that she observes; the “inexplicable and impenetrable”
nature of what she sees heightens her alienation, for such is the case from “any view”—a
particular difficulty for a poet so conscious of perspective and point-of-view.

When Bishop’s poetry does consider those who live in Brazil (and ostensibly are
better able to know the place), it always includes some kind of objective distance that
leaves a gap between the poet and the persons under observation. For example, in the first
poem of this collection in which Bishop observes the Brazilian people, “Squatter’s
Children,” the poet’s perspective is pronouncedly distanced from the children being
observed: “On the unbreathing sides of hills / they play, a specklike girl and boy, / alone,
but near a specklike house” (95). These “squatter’s children” even have a “dancing
yellow spot, a pup” (95) to join them in play. Although Bishop addresses the poem to
these “squatter’s children,” the only voice that reaches the children is their mother’s: “and
Mother’s voice, ugly as sin, / keeps calling to them to come in” (95). The emphasis on the
distance between the poet and her subject mitigates any intimacy in Bishop’s final
address to the children that occurs in the poem’s final stanza. Yet, in spite of this distance
between poet and poetic subject, it is significant that Bishop emphasizes these children’s
relationship to the place in which they live: they are squatter’s children, laying a claim to
the land not based on ownership or control but simple occupation. It is, most simply, the
place that they know. And despite Bishop’s inability to make closer contact with them,
she acknowledges that the “lawfulness endures” (95) in their role as squatters, suggesting
the integrity of their relationship to the land.

This concern with poor “squatters” occupying land that they do not legally own
continues in the poem “Manuelzhino.” Bishop points out in the epigraph to the poem that
“A friend of the writer is speaking” (96), which again inserts a noticeable distance between Bishop’s personal perspective and what the speaker of the poem observes. But Bishop identifies this speaker in a letter as Macedo Soares (OA 315), which suggests a degree of intimacy between the position of the poem’s speaker and Bishop’s own position. In the poem the speaker addresses “Manuelzinho,” who lives on her land:

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—
a sort of inheritance; white,
in your thirties now, and supposed
to supply me with vegetables,
but you don’t; or you won’t; or you can’t
get the idea through your brain—
the world’s worst gardener since Cain. (96)

Throughout the poem the incompetence and idiosyncrasies of Manuelzinho are enumerated from the exasperated perspective of the landowner, who at times feels that “I can’t endure it / another minute” (96). Despite Manuelzinho’s incompetence as a farmer the poem’s speaker acknowledges the enduring connection of his family to the land:

I watch you through the rain,
trotting, light, on bare feet,
up the steep paths you have made—
or your father and grandfather made—
all over my property […] (96)

Although Manuelzinho’s family has a generational connection with the land, the poem’s speaker does not hesitate in asserting her legal control over “my property.” The poem makes clear that only the speaker’s endless generosity allows Manuelzinho’s incompetence to be tolerated, and the speaker’s tone is consistently patronizing and belittling. Even when the speaker makes some effort to come to terms with Manuelzinho’s existence, the patronizing tone remains: “You helpless, foolish man, / I love you all I can, / I think. Or do I?” (99).
In a letter from 1967, after the publication of *Questions of Travel*, Bishop discusses a reviewer “who misunderstood” “Manuelzhino, finding it “condescending.” She acknowledges that she endured similar criticisms in “the social-conscious days” with poems like “Cootchie” (first published in 1941 and included in *North & South*), and that these reviewers suffer a misapprehension that “I lived in a world (I was obviously VERY RICH) where people had Servants, imagine, and so on” (*OA* 479). Bishop goes on to defend her poem’s authenticity: “Actually, Brazilians like ‘Manuelzhino’ very much. I’ve had several English-reading friends tell me, ‘My God (or Our Lady), it’s exactly like that’” (*OA* 479). Two significant factors arise in this defense of “Manuelzhino.” First, Bishop shows a lack of awareness of the privilege of her own position: her comment about having “Servants” implies that this way of life is obviously a common one, rather than simply common among a particular social class. And second, Bishop defends “Manuelzhino” not on the grounds that the reviewer has missed a subtext that is critical of the speaker’s arrogance, or that reveals the complex interdependence of landowner and squatter—she defends the poem for its *accuracy*, validated by her elite, English-speaking friends in Brazil. These comments suggest the difficulty for Bishop of understanding the cultural conditions of Brazil from a perspective other than her own, or of even acknowledging the possible validity of another perspective on these questions of wealth and class.

“Manuelzhino” also plays an important role in the “Brazil” section of *Questions of Travel* because its landowner speaker represents the only significant presence of a member of the Brazilian elite. Bishop does not submit her companion, or any other upper class Brazilian, to the scrutinizing observations of her poetic eye. Instead, she empowers
Macedo Soares as speaker of the poem, which provides a telling contrast from “Squatter’s Children” (these two poems appear sequentially in *Questions of Travel*). If Bishop’s perspective in the first poem appears mildly sympathetic to the squatter’s children, then “Manuelzhino” and its landowning speaker seem to reverse any such sympathy, portraying the burden that a squatter like Manuelzhino represents to the poem’s speaker.

The other poem from “Brazil” in which Bishop adopts a distinct persona is “The Riverman.” As with “Manuelzhino” Bishop includes an epigraphic note that provides details regarding the poem’s speaker. In “The Riverman” this speaker is “A man in a remote Amazonian village [who] decides to become a *sacaca*, a witch doctor who works with water spirits.” Bishop goes on to explain the source of this poetic subject: “These and other details on which this poem is based are from *Amazon Town*, by Charles Wagley” (105). The poem’s speaker is moved by supernatural events to attempt to become a “witch doctor”: “I got up in the night / for the Dolphin spoke to me” (105). This magical tale demonstrates a degree of interest on Bishop’s part in the folklore of Brazil, but it does not show the same interest in understanding the cultural conditions that exist among people and places that has been so evident in her previous work. Instead the Brazilian speaker of the poem appears exotically susceptible to a belief in such superstitions. Thus, this poem in which Bishop adopts the persona of a rural Brazilian does not approach the immediacy or cultural import of earlier poems like “Jeronimo’s House.” The exotic, fictionalized context of “The Riverman” maintains the poem’s
distance from Bishop’s personal experience of Brazil—as does the character of “Micuçu,” “a burglar and killer” who flees to the hills of Rio in “The Burglar of Babylon” (112), the final poem of the “Brazil” section.

Of course, not all of Bishop’s poems are necessarily concerned with the events and experiences of her life. But the poems that begin the “Brazil” section of Questions of Travel—“Arrival at Santos,” “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” and “Questions of Travel”—as well as biographical details gleaned from her correspondence, create a greater expectation for these poems to reflect the conditions of Bishop’s residence in Brazil. Instead, Bishop’s poetry of Brazil in Questions of Travel takes a different approach to her interest in the connection between people and place: her perspective in many ways remains that of the tourist of “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” kept at a remove from the immediate details of her experience and now without the deliberate effort to overcome the dominant culture’s attitudes toward her subject. Of course, Bishop’s outsider status may in part be attributed to the fact that she was a foreign traveler to Brazil; yet many of these poems were written after Bishop had resided in Brazil for several years—for example, “Burglar of Babylon” was first published in 1964, thirteen years into her residence in Brazil. What also highlights the distance of these poems is their stark contrast with the other poems that Bishop produced for Questions of Travel, as well as the short story “In the Village.” For it was “In the Village” in particular that inspired Bishop’s comment about experiencing “total recall” about her childhood while living in Brazil.

Bishop wrote this story shortly after her arrival in Brazil, and it was later included in Questions of Travel between the first section of poems, “Brazil,” and the final section
of poems, titled “Elsewhere.” Bishop clearly explains the origins of the story, stating that it “is entirely, not partly, autobiographical” (OA 477). The story concerns Bishop’s childhood in Nova Scotia with her grandparents and the final time that Bishop’s mother came to live with them before the mother was put in a sanatorium. The story depicts young Elizabeth at home in the rural village of her grandparents, interacting familiarly with the village’s residents. In comparison with the depictions of the rural peasants and farmers of Brazil in Questions of Travel, “In the Village” reveals a time from Bishop’s life when she was able to know and interact meaningfully with the rural working class. Young Elizabeth encounters Nate the blacksmith, Miss Gurney the dressmaker, Mr. McLean and Mrs. Chisholm, who are farmers, and other residents of the village. In the blacksmith’s shop Bishop asks Nate to “Make me a ring,” and he obliges, as “two men stand watching, chewing or spitting tobacco, matches, horseshoe nails—anything, apparently, but with such presence; they are perfectly at home” (257). Bishop, clearly, felt “perfectly at home” in this village as well, despite the exceedingly difficult situation regarding her mother.

These kinds of connections between Bishop and those who share her surroundings appear again in the final section of poems in Questions of Travel. If the “Brazil” section is populated only by those with whom Bishop fails to make a connection (i.e., the Brazilian lower classes), then the book’s “Elsewhere” section, which appears after “In the Village,” presents a number of meaningful human interaction for the speakers of these poems. For example, in “Manners,” the poem’s young speaker learns from her grandfather:
When we came to Hustler Hill,
he said the mare was tired,
so we all got down and walked,
as our good manners required. (122)

And in “Sestina” the grandmother offers similarly meaningful interactions for the poem’s young speaker:

With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother. (123)

The imagery of “Sestina” resembles imagery from “In the Village,” further suggesting that such poems are largely autobiographical.

Another poem from “Elsewhere,” “Visits to St. Elizabeths,” recounts Bishop’s visits to an incarcerated Ezra Pound, “the tragic man / that lies in the house of Bedlam” (133), while she served as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress from 1949-50. Bishop places these visits in a larger cultural context, subtly commenting on Pound’s Fascist activities during World War II with the inclusion of “the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat / that dances weeping down the ward” (134). Such a move is reminiscent of some of Bishop’s early poems, such as “A Miracle for Breakfast,” “Roosters,” and “The Monument,” which also sought to be responsive to a wider cultural context. And like those poems, Bishop keeps “Visits to St. Elizabeths” rooted in the immediate details of personal experience. In the broader scope of Questions of Travel, this attention to immediate details in the poems of “Elsewhere” distinguishes them from the poems of “Brazil,” despite many of the latter poems having clearly autobiographical origins. The poems of “Elsewhere” offer details that are immediate and concrete, while the poems of
“Brazil” maintain a distance from their observed topics, whether that distance arises from the poet’s uncertainty about what she has seen, or the use of poetic personae as filters between poetic speaker and poetic subject.

V.

Bishop fails to explore the connection between person and place in her “Brazil” poems with the same immediacy and insight that marked poems like “Roosters,” “Jeronimo’s House,” or “At the Fishhouses.” Even “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” in which Bishop struggles to reconcile her experience of foreign places with the cultural precedents familiar to her, demonstrates a more sincere, yet ultimately thwarted, desire to understand the relationship between these foreign places and the people that reside in them. And several of these earlier poems show Bishop seeking a wider cultural discourse for her poetry that can accommodate disparate experiences, such as the effects of the Great Depression, the militarism of war, and the conditions of poverty. But Bishop is never able to penetrate the barriers of class and race that inform her experience in Brazil, and it is these biases, rather than her status as foreign-born resident, that contribute most significantly to her sustained perspective as outsider or tourist in these poems. Yet one would be remiss to suggest that these poems represent a failure on Bishop’s part to resolve her investigations into the interconnectedness of people, observation, and place. As the places and circumstances change, so do the characteristics inherent in Bishop’s questions.

Bishop makes the persistence of these questions perfectly clear with the first page of her final collection, Geography III, which consists of excerpts from a
nineteenth-century textbook, “Lessons in Geography.” These excerpts begin simply: “What is geography? A description of the earth’s surface. What is the Earth? The planet or body on which we live” (157). But the excerpt ends with a flurry of questions that are not answered: “In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait? The Mountains? The Isthmus? What is in the East? In the West? In the South? In the North? In the Northwest? In the Southeast? In the Northeast? In the Southwest?” (157). The proliferation of questions reinforces the ultimate impossibility of definitively answering these questions of geography, these questions of what lies in specific places and how we relate to them. Even as certain questions are answered, others spring up: we can answer what lies in the North and in the East, but that inevitably leads to the question of what lies in the Northeast. As we mark out the contours of our understanding, the areas of uncertainty that lie between the parameters of our knowledge become more evident and raise further questions. One senses that such questions could be asked indefinitely.

The poems of Geography III follow most clearly from “In the Village” and Bishop’s experience of “total recall” of her childhood in Nova Scotia, for several of these poems conspicuously employ memory as the dominant trope for understanding the places that they examine. “In the Waiting Room” depicts an event that Bishop recollected from her childhood and that she had previously described at the end of her non-fiction piece “The Country Mouse.” Although the aunt’s name is changed, the events are the same: while waiting for her aunt in a dentist’s office as child, Bishop experiences a profound sense of her own existence: “I felt: you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them” (160). What seems to inspire this revelation is the young speaker’s examination of an issue of National Geographic: “while I waited I read / the National Geographic / (I
could read) and carefully studied the photographs” (159). The description of what she sees emphasizes the foreignness of such images to a young child living in Massachusetts; it also emphasizes the strangeness inherent in identifying her common existence as “one of them,” especially as it creates a connection with the women in the photos:

A dead man slung on a pole
—“Long Pig,” the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying. (159)

This poem offers an interesting revision of the relationship between cultural precedents and individual experience that Bishop explored in “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance.” In “Concordance,” Bishop’s personal experience of foreign places serves as a counterpoint to what authoritative texts say about those places; in “In the Waiting Room,” the six-year-old Bishop (“three days / and you’ll be seven years old” [160]) has a much more limited scope of experience against which to compare those images from National Geographic and the disorienting effects they have on her. Bishop’s young speaker can only consider her limited, personal experience and the place in which she finds herself. As the poem ends and the young Elizabeth overcomes the confusion caused by what she saw, she is left with the place in which she lives:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918. (161)
The limited knowledge of this six-year-old speaker reflects the narrowing scope in *Geography III* of what can be learned from the intersection of people and places. The child in “In the Waiting Room” is able only to affirm her own existence and the location of that existence. Although Bishop composed this poem over fifty years after the event depicted, she chooses not to include any greater insights that she may have acquired over those years. Instead, she provides the simple recollection of the experience from a limited, personal perspective.

The poems “Crusoe in England” and “The Moose” function similarly, with acts of recollection central to both poems. In “Crusoe in England” the speaker recalls the island on which he was marooned and the loneliness he experienced: “[…] I told myself / ‘Pity should begin at home.’ So the more / pity I felt, the more I felt at home” (163). Only Friday’s appearance offers a respite from this loneliness: “Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends” (165). But Crusoe is speaking of these events after his removal from the island and his separation from Friday. This recollection only engenders sadness, and Crusoe denies that any larger meaning to his experience persists:

The knife there on the shelf—
it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
It lived. How many years did I
beg it, implore it, not to break?
I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
the bluish blade, the broken tip,
the lines of wood-grain on the handle…
Now it won’t look at me at all.
The living soul had dribbled away.
My eyes rest on it and pass on. (166)
If a “meaning” could once be found in Crusoe’s experience, he now finds himself left only with the details of his personal recollection. The knife that once “reeked of meaning,” and on which his life so fully depended, “won’t look at” Crusoe, which causes him to “pass on” to other considerations.

During the long bus ride of “The Moose,” the poem’s speaker overhears others engaged in their own acts of recollection, particularly one set of voices:

Grandparents’ voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;

deads, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened. (171-2)

These recollections continue, and their appeal for Bishop seems to be their universality, their part in “Eternity.” Yet this universality also suggests that the specific meaning lies only with the details of one’s private experiences, a notion that is further suggested by the speaker’s conclusion to what she overhears:

“Yes…” that peculiar affirmative. “Yes…”
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means “Life’s like that.
We know it (also death).” (172)

The sudden arrival of the moose, who “has come out of / the impenetrable wood / and stands there, looms, rather, / in the middle of the road” (172), prevents any further insights into this affirmation of “life” and “death.” Again the sense of meaning remains
limited, as it did in “In the Waiting Room” and “Crusoe in England,” particularly in comparison with some of Bishop’s previous poems—“Roosters,” “Jeronimo’s House,” “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” “At the Fishhouses”—in which the concrete details of experience allowed Bishop to explore her potential insights in a larger context.

Thus, these late poems begin to contract the scope of Bishop’s explorations of the interconnections between observer and observed; natives and travelers; local and foreign places—even after her previous work had continually kept the parameters of such questions relatively limited, particularly when compared with poets like Crane, Williams, and Olson. In these later poems memory also plays a greater role in the experiences depicted—memory even becomes, at times, as vital as the details of immediate experience. The poem “Santarém,” published a year before Bishop’s death, effectively addresses this growing role of memory, as well as its uncertainties. The poem begins: “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?” (185). Yet after this initial uncertainty, Bishop more fully recalls her arrival at the town of Santarém and its beauty:

That golden evening I really wanted to go no further; more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon, grandly, silently flowing, flowing east. (185)
As part of her recollection, Bishop also considers the terms by which her experience might be interpreted:

Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
in the watery, dazzling dialectic. (185)

Bishop’s “resolving” “dialectic” suggests a desire to question not only the traditional terms of literary interpretation but also the terms that she has previously used to consider her experiences and gain some understanding from them. Instead, she sees these terms made meaningless, or “dissolved,” into the “watery” scene that presented itself to her at that moment. In a sense, then, at this late point in her career, Bishop seeks to affirm once again the importance of immediate, local conditions to any understanding that her experience may offer, rather than the abstract terms that may put this experience into a wider discourse.

Toward the end of her recollections Bishop describes the one thing that she did take away from this visit: “an empty wasp’s nest” hanging in the pharmacist’s window: “small, exquisite, clean matte white, / and hard as stucco. I admired it / so much he gave it to me” (186). But in the poem’s final lines, as Bishop returns to her boat, she is asked by “Mr. Swan, / Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric […] ‘What’s that ugly thing?’” (187). The poem affords Bishop no response, suggesting that the souvenir that most fully captures her experience at Santarém can only express this quality to her, and that it is an experience impossible to convey to another. Thus, like Williams and Olson at the end of their epics, Bishop finds herself retreating to the limited assurances of individual experience, despite the evident difficulty of conveying such an experience to
someone else (a fellow traveler, or a reader of her poetry). “Santarém” shows Bishop continuing to struggle with the questions that have persisted throughout her poetry—how does one come to understand what one observes? How can one come to know the connection between persons and places? Can attention to the immediate, physical details lead to knowledge in a wider context? These questions cannot be answered definitively, as they refuse to resolve in “that watery, dazzling dialectic.” But Bishop has discovered that the terms in which such questions are to be considered are more important than the misleading certainties of definitive answers, for these questions must be asked repeatedly in terms that are contingent upon the specific contexts of each experience. No conceptual framework, like Williams’s “field of action” or Olson’s “composition by field,” can contain, or give meaning to, the disparate but concrete details of experience. And in this conclusion Bishop finds the terms for an inclusive, even democratic, poetic approach to the intersections of people and places, even if her own work does not always fulfill this potential.

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1 This element in Bishop’s work has been identified by numerous critics; see for example, Doreski, Costello, Harrison, and Travisano.

2 A note about citations from Bishop’s work: distinctions between The Collected Prose and The Complete Poems are made only when necessary to avoid confusion. All citations for One Art: Letters are indicated with OA followed by the page number.

3 For more detailed discussions of “The Map,” see chapter six of Margaret Dickie’s book, as well as Mutlu Blasing’s chapter on Bishop.

4 From Diana E. Wyllie, page xix. All references to publication dates of Bishop’s work are from Wyllie’s reference guide.
From Longenbach’s “Elizabeth Bishop’s Social Conscience”: “Bishop would later recall [‘A Miracle for Breakfast’] as a “‘social conscious’ poem’ that was ‘written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples’” (473).

For example, in a letter to Moore Bishop states: “I knew I should not let the ‘bitterly’ and ‘very hot’ in the second stanza go. It is as yet unsolved. The boisterousness of ‘gallons of coffee’ I wanted to overlook because I liked ‘gallons’ being near ‘galleries.’ And the ‘crumb’ and ‘sun’ is of course its greatest fault” (OA 54).

For a further discussion of Bishop’s work and her distaste for overt political statement, see Renée E. Curry and Betsy Erkkila.

For two differing perspectives on Bishop’s writing about Nova Scotia while living in Brazil, see Susan McCabe and Steven Gould Axelrod; see also Priscilla M. Paton, who discusses Bishop’s works about Nova Scotia and Brazil in the larger context of landscape poetry.

In Bishop’s correspondence we find a letter to Marianne Moore from the summer of 1946 that clearly recounts the events that occur in “The Moose,” events that Bishop experienced while traveling back to the US from Nova Scotia (OA 141).
CONCLUSION

The primitive destiny of the land is obscure, but it has been obscured further by a field of unrelated culture stuccoed upon it that has made that destiny more difficult than ever to determine.

—William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain*

[T]he great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written.

—Wallace Stevens, “Imagination as Value”

In the work of each of the five poets I have discussed, the poetics of place takes shape as both a negation of a particular approach to modernism (Eliotian, Poundean, or New Critical) as well as an affirmation of the unique, local conditions of American experience as the proper ground for modern poetry. As we have seen, finding the terms of what they would reject posed little difficulty for these poets. Conceptualizing the poetic approach that they would follow, however, posed a much greater challenge, as we saw with Williams’s “field of action” concept: it clearly negates the extraction of previous works of genius practiced by Eliot and Pound, yet the approach that it advocates—an “ill-assorted” “profusion” “in which some later Eliot will dig”—sounds surprisingly vague and unsatisfactory for the poet seeking to enact a truly modernist poetics. After all, does Williams really want the success of his work to rest on the Eliot of a later generation?

These conceptual uncertainties that hound Williams nonetheless contain the terms by which he and the other poets of this study overcome the challenges inherent in their
work. Williams’s allusion to Eliot’s search for “genius” subtly hints at the assumption that misleads the poets of this study, which relates closely to Eliot’s advocacy for the “existing monuments” (SP 38) of literary tradition. For Eliot, these literary “monuments” were an unavoidable presence for modern poets that must be accounted for. The five poets I have discussed shared a desire to break free from this stultifying influence and write a poetry accountable first and foremost to the conditions of the contemporary world. What misleads these poets, however, is the assumption that they must construct their own literary monuments to take the place of those that they reject. This assumption is implicit in each poet’s struggle for canonical status, such as with Crane and Williams’s efforts to wrest the dominant conception of modernism away from Eliot and Pound; or Stevens’s attempt to construct a “supreme fiction” and to articulate the terms by which his poetry can best be evaluated in his late prose; or Olson’s desire to right the ship of Western thought, a project that he believed had been started by Melville and others; or Bishop’s efforts to balance her geographical distance from the literary mainstream with her work’s success within that mainstream.

This lofty notion that each poet must construct her or his own monument of poetic work forces these poets to confront the inevitable failure of such a project, and the degree of this failure directly corresponds with the ambitiousness of each poet’s initial goals. For our three epically inclined poets, Crane, Williams, and Olson, these struggles are more pronounced as their cultural epics cannot support the ambitions with which they were begun. Crane struggles to build coherently toward the visionary affirmation of “Atlantis,” the first section of The Bridge that he composed but which he determined to place at the end of his epic. Williams and Olson both sought to capture a collective vision of their
contemporary moments in their epic poems, yet by the end of these works both poets were forced to recalibrate the terms of their projects and offer a more limited, personal perspective. Stevens never sought this same kind of epic scope for his work; he characterized his desire to create “a supreme fiction” as only “notes toward” such a goal. Nonetheless, Stevens must consider his inability to achieve this “supreme fiction” in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” and confront the exigencies of “the poem of pure reality.” Bishop’s poetic ambitions were more restrained and practical when compared with these other four poets, and in her early poem “The Monument” she admonishes herself and her readers to be wary of such monuments (literary or otherwise) with the poem’s final line: “Watch it closely” (25). Yet Bishop’s confrontations with her literary precedents were still similar in kind, if lesser in degree, to those of Crane, Williams, Stevens, and Olson. A note of failure arises in “Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” as Bishop is unable to imbue her own experience with the same import afforded to the literary and cultural precedents that she confronts.

Such moments of uncertainty result from these poets’ efforts to replace the previous literary monuments with ones of their own making, for the traditional assumptions of such a project contradict these poets’ modernist aspirations. Yet, just as Williams’s description of the “field of action” identified the assumption that misleads these five poets, it also indicates the means by which these poets are able to overcome their failures: by digging the ground on which they initially sought to erect these new monuments. But this is not the digging performed by the “extractors of genius” like Eliot or Pound, for the poets of this study realize that the “existing monuments,” whether Eliot’s or their own newly constructed ones, were not the true sites of culture. Instead the
true source and nature of culture exists in the ground, on the very spot where their poetic work takes place. For the ground is immediate and tangible, physically accessible to anyone with the inclination to explore it; this ground is also culturally resonant, bearing the marks of its past inhabitants and the events that have taken place there. Thus, the digging that these poets undertake seeks to know the ground for what it is—to know the material and cultural qualities of which it consists, rather than what fragments of genius might be buried within it.

This metaphor of digging or descending to the ground appears in the work of all five poets, and it consistently affirms the integrity of a particular place as it exists now, while also taking into account the shaping influences of local culture and history. Olson expressed this imperative most explicitly: “Best thing to do is to dig one thing or place or man until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it.” Only when Olson loses sight of this imperative and moves away from *The Maximus Poems*’ focus on Gloucester does his work struggle to fulfill its initial promise. Williams continually expressed this imperative to know the ground, first in *In the American Grain* with his praise of Sam Houston and Edgar Allen Poe for striving “to have the feet of [their] understanding on the ground […] the ground, the only ground that [they] know, that which is under [their] feet.” And in Book Three of *Paterson* Williams responded to Pound’s didacticism with a detailed list of the layers of earth found while digging a well in Paterson. Importantly, this particular act of digging was not in search of precious resources (something to be taken from its locale) but simply for the basic
necessity of water. This contrast reemphasizes one that Williams repeatedly made between Pound’s desire for caviar and his own satisfaction with bread—with what is humble, mundane, and sufficient.

The act of descending to the ground figures prominently in the work of our other three poets. In The Bridge Crane begins the crucial poem “The River” with a shift of perspective—from a train speeding through the Midwest to the three hobos walking along the tracks. This descent from the train to those who walk upon the land plays an essential role in Crane’s efforts to know more fully the physical details of the American landscape. For Stevens, the necessity of confronting the physical reality of New Haven means that he must “descend to the street and inhale a health of air.” Even Professor Eucalyptus, alone in his room in deep contemplation, cannot resist “[t]he instinct for earth, for New Haven.” And in “At the Fishhouses,” Bishop gains her greatest insight when she descends to the water’s edge—an insight rooted in the concrete, physical details of her experience.

For all five of these poets, the effort to know the ground means knowing the particular people, ideas, and events—the metaphorical mud and dirt—that constitute the ground of a place. By incorporating in their work both the physical details and the cultural elements of a particular place, these poets are able to forge a poetics that is fully responsive to those impulses that shaped poetry in the modern period. One of these impulses seeks a greater immediacy in poetry that would more directly reflect the conditions of the modern era, particularly the uniqueness of the era. The avant-garde and Objectivist strains of modern poetry pursued this impulse most explicitly by attempting to privilege the materiality of both the “the word and the world,” or the poetic text and what
it conveys. By emphasizing the immediate experience of local places and landmarks, the five poets of this study also assert a material priority in their work, which can be seen in Williams’s famous assertion “no ideas but in things”; or Olson’s conception of poetry as a field of objects; or Bishop’s moment of insight rooted in the physical sensations of dipping her hand into the icy cold water in “At the Fishhouses.” Another essential modernist impulse, which is related to the desire for immediacy, is the effort to make poetry as culturally relevant as possible by accurately conveying a collective experience of modernism as an historical and cultural moment. A poetics responsive to this impulse views contemporary experience in the modern period as influenced by past people, ideas, and events; yet this contemporary experience also differs significantly from these cultural and historical precedents.

These two aspects of the “culturally relevant” impulse in modernism—the “collective” nature of the experience conveyed and its conception of how the past influences the present—help to illustrate clearly the distinct approach to modernism practiced by the five poets of this study. The culturally relevant experience that one seeks to convey cannot be definitively “collective,” as any number of factors—regional, national, racial, gendered, and so on—will stymie such a goal. Yet Eliot and Pound’s efforts at capturing the experience of the modern period in large part resist such limitations and more willingly posit their work as constituting a collective cultural perspective. The five poets that I have discussed, however, foreground the importance of a local context in conveying any collective experience in their poetry. Thus, their work conveys the perspectives of particular communities, yet only so far as that experience can be rooted in the context of a particular locality. Further, in terms of how the past
influences the present, these five poets believed that Eliot and Pound’s conception of modernism placed too great an emphasis on traditional sources as a way of giving structure and meaning to the present. In addition, these traditional sources were often geographically distant from the local, American context of modern experience—Pound’s interest in Confucian philosophy or Italian renaissance poetry; or Eliot’s interest in Elizabethan culture and metaphysical poetry—and therefore, for the poets of this study, too remote from the proper concerns for modern American poetry.

Thus, the poetics of place reconciles these two crucial modernist imperatives: its focus on local places provides the immediacy of what can be experienced directly in one’s local environs, yet this poetics also acknowledges the cultural and historical factors that shape one’s experience of that place. By effectively synthesizing these imperatives, these five poets forge a poetics that is most fully responsive to the shaping forces of modern poetry. Yet, because they did not achieve this poetics through an organized or systematic effort, these poets struggled at times to realize the potential that existed in their methods for confronting the poetic challenges of their era. Nonetheless, these poets’ consistently sought to value the specific details that arise from an experience of place—whether that place be New York and the site of the Brooklyn Bridge; Paterson, New Jersey; New Haven, Connecticut; Gloucester, Massachusetts; or the coast of Nova Scotia and the foreign locales of Brazil—even if the places in question were not typically considered to be essential centers of history or culture. Thus, because these poets explore the ground of a particular place to know its essential elements, rather than to find what could be extracted and purified, their approach also possesses a democratic potential that aligns their work with the inclusive optimism of Whitman. Yet whereas Whitman
composed an epic in which the self serves as the vessel that could contain the multitudes of a new nation, these poets offer their experiences of local places as the poetic sites in which the immediacy of the present moment converges with the imperatives of culture and history. In essence, these poems of place represent that threshold at which the concreteness of individual experience intersects with the more fluid conceptions of community, region, and nation. And in these poems even the seemingly small, mundane details of experience can ultimately alter the terms by which we conceive of the larger realm of culture.
LIST OF REFERENCES


