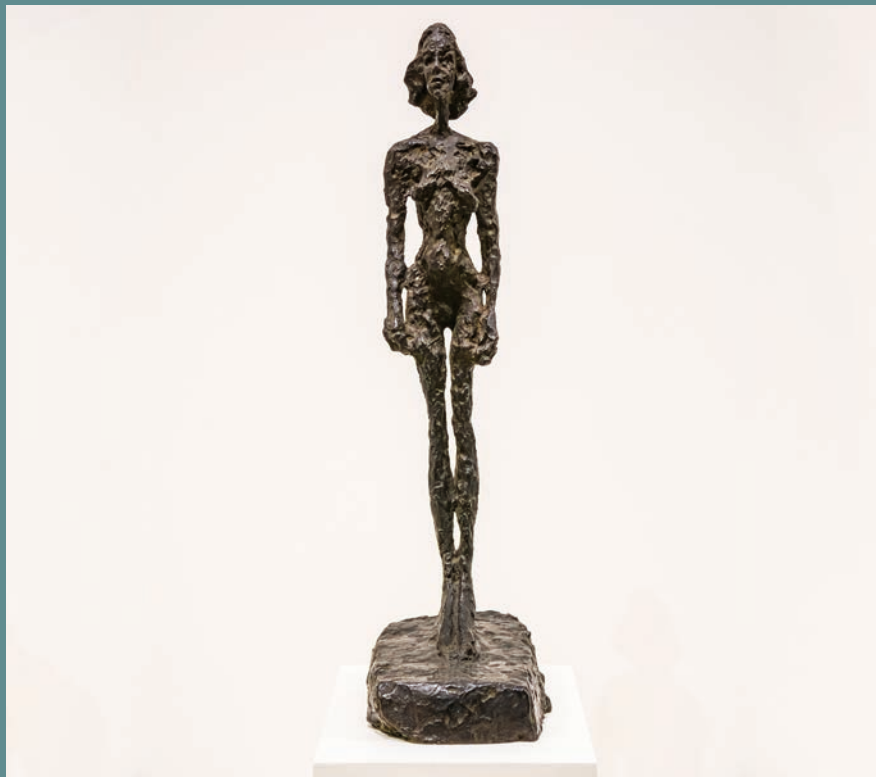


THE BEST OF SCHOLARS AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

10



Peter Nicholls

MODERNIST FIGURES

Vol. 1

New Poetries

ibidem

Peter Nicholls

Modernist Figures

Volume 1: New Poetries

With a foreword by Chad Hegelmeyer

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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Foreword

Chad Hegelmeyer

What was the proper material of modern poetry, and what, exactly, did it do with or to that material? I was an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley during the heyday of scholarly interest in literary modernism; my peers and I encountered these questions everywhere—reading all of Eliot alongside Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with Steven Botterill, Pound’s *Cantos* with Charles Altieri, Stein and Dickinson with Lyn Hejinian. On one particularly memorable day, during a labor strike of campus employees, my lyric poetry professor, Eric Falci, held class in the basement of an off-campus bar and nightclub to avoid having to cross picket lines. The basement was normally reserved for late-night dance parties and DJ sessions. Painted entirely black—floor, walls, and ceiling—it looked uncanny in the mixture of afternoon sun and fluorescent light and reeked of stale booze and bleach. We circled metal folding chairs, sipped coke, and ate French fries while discussing Marianne Moore’s “Poetry.” At the time, I felt strongly that poetry was not only a way of encountering and learning about the past, it also seemed to equip me with ways of understanding things that had previously baffled me about the present into which I was maturing, a way of looking back to the century into which I was born from the one which was just beginning. And so those questions about the necessity of lyric felt pressing, urgent.

I relate these reminiscences because my experience of reading Peter Nicholls’s two-volume collection, *Modernist Figures*, strongly evoked reflections of my own first encounters with these poets and with questions about the possibilities of

teaching and learning through them. As Peter Nicholls observes in these extraordinary essays, some of these figures have themselves become thoroughly historical to us. It has now been more than a century since the publication of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, *Tender Buttons*, and *Spring and All*. A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, what perspective do we have on these works? What can they say about our present? As Nicholls writes in the fourth chapter, one of the challenges of teaching literary modernism is that “with every generation we move further from the cultural matrix that Pound clearly felt he shared with his reader.”¹ Having recently returned to Moore’s “Poetry” with my own students, under quite different circumstances than those in which I first read it, I believe this could be said about much of modernist poetry, not only that of Pound, though he, perhaps, represents a special case. But can that poetry, some of which attempted to find ways of reckoning with its past, now provide us with access to its own time, which finds itself in need of recovery by contemporary readers?

Modernist Figures, though, does not present the historicity of its subject as a cultural milieu being lost to the relentless revision of the “new.” Nor does Nicholls succumb to the imperious critical tendency to make literary modernism a global or perpetual mode of explaining the present. In his rigorous and exciting readings, nostalgia and presentism are to be resisted. Instead, the past is seemingly “peopled by ‘re-treating figure[s]’ whose faces are averted from us, denying us the immediacy of knowledge we feel compelled to seek”² but also one that, borrowing from Susan Howe, “cannot be

1 Volume 1, Chapter 4, “The Elusive Allusion: Poetry and Exegesis,” 146.

2 Volume 2, Chapter 25, “‘The Pastness of Landscape’: Susan Howe’s *Pierce-Arrow*,” 343. Nicholls is commenting on the conclusion of *Pierce-Arrow*. (New York: New Directions, 1999), 144.

wholly past.”³ As Nicholls observes, “One of the most striking things about literary modernism is its persistent hold on the contemporary imagination...[and] so we continue to revisit it as if in search of some new clue to understanding our own troubled version of modernity.”⁴ Haunted by it, we find ourselves compelled to “rework” it. And so these volumes repeatedly present the past to us “in a compound tense...as at once a return and a turn to something new.”⁵ As Nicholls argues, Ezra Pound would attempt to make “that haunted space the very condition of modernism.”⁶ In this regard we are always reckoning with the problems of history that the literary modernisms observed in this collection were, in part summoned to answer. Can different forms of modernism actually provide us with the tools necessary to deal with the problems of temporality—the ongoing “shock of the new”—experienced in reading and thinking about them?

While lyric poetry’s perennial concern has been with a “here and now” and an “imagined moment of plenitude,”⁷ Nicholls argues that modernist poetics figure the present as always a “belated” one (in the sense of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*);⁸ for this reason, an “innovative poetics” is also one that is connected to a “a radical approach” to history.⁹ This is made most explicit in Volume 2, Chapter 25, “Unsettling the

3 Howe, *Pierce-Arrow*, 16. Quoted in “The Pastness of Landscape,” 343.

4 Volume 1, Chapter 6, “Mud and Metaphysics: The Matter of Modernism,” 191.

5 Volume 2, Chapter 14, “An Experiment with Time: Ezra Pound and the Example of Japanese Noh,” 33.

6 “An Experiment with Time,” 33.

7 Volume 1, Chapter 7, “‘A Mouthful of Air’: Modern Poetry and the Idea of Presence,” 226.

8 See Volume 2, Chapter 24, “The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison,” 295-6.

9 Volume 2, Chapter 25, “Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History,” 321.

Wilderness” on Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*. Howe, Nicholls writes, belongs to a “long and distinguished line” of American poets—like Ezra Pound and Charles Olson—who are also “freelance” historians. But it also holds true for many of the poets here who are not American or who are not even strictly poets (like Toni Morrison) but who share a keenly skeptical view of poetry’s ability to make things truly present to us. It is *not* simply that the past is fated to persist and dominate the present (see Volume 1, Chapter 6, “Mud and Metaphysics”); rather the “matter of modernism” is always undermining a “metaphysics of the ‘new.’”¹⁰ This is what makes it possible for poetry to be, as Nicholls argues in the introduction to these volumes, a “counterforce...[a]gainst the coercive certainties of public discourse,” a relief from the nightmare of repetition and (as Robert Duncan called it) the “agony of the contemporary.”¹¹ Such a possibility is indeed a relief during a time when our public discourse seems dominated by factions whose appeals either to a supposed past or a grimly imagined near-future are equally coercive.

Modernist Figures offers lessons for literary history and the often vexed questions of periodizing the twentieth century. Readers will find that this selection of essays radiates out from Nicholls’s still essential intervention into the “new modernist studies” in *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Second Edition, 2017). Throughout these volumes, Nicholls is refreshingly uninterested in a “clean-cut” chronology or “progression from one tendency to another.”¹² Instead, figures

10 “Mud and Metaphysics,” 192.

11 Robert Duncan, “The H.D. Book: Chapter 1,” *Coyote’s Journal*, 5/6 (1966), 19. Nicholls includes this quotation in Volume 2, Chapter 23, “Beyond the Cantos: Pound and Recent American Poetry,” 270.

12 “Beyond the Cantos,” 260

persist or crop up in unexpected points along the timeline. Nicholls discovers surprising inheritances of modernism from pasts that the modernists explicitly rejected or implicitly disavowed, connections to Melville's Orientalized skepticism, Swinburne's pre-Raphaelite classicism, and Ruskin's outmoded Victorianism. (He has continued to explore these figural inheritances in his recent work on Becket and Leopardi.) The essays on Pound often focus on the importance of his later work, volumes of the *Cantos* (like *Thrones*) that did not appear until the late 1950s or 60s, decades in which Pound's work—and Pound himself as a figure—was “still very much a live issue. Would he finish *The Cantos*? Was the poem irretrievably damaged by his political errors? Was a full recantation likely or possible?”¹³ Similarly, Nicholls reminds us that new collections of poetry were being published by Objectivists like Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and George Oppen well into the 1970s, concurrent with (and, as Nicholls argues, influential for) Language poets that we normally associate with the decade.¹⁴ Although the essays themselves follow a more or less chronological order, one feels the alternative temporality central to the volumes' understanding of poetics in the associations across and among its many figures, as when chapters 27 and 28 on Lyn Hejinian's investment in “phenomenology” rhyme with chapter 14 on Ezra Pound's interest in Japanese Noh theater.

This holds true even for the collection's most seemingly chronological figure, Pound himself, who appears as a kind of hinge between the two volumes and for whom there is a section of poets and poetics that come “after.” But this “after”

13 “Beyond the *Cantos*,” 260.

14 See Volume 1, Chapter 11, “A Homemade World?”, 372.

is much later than we might tend to think, and the Pound that comes “before” is “multifarious,” contradictory, and his later influence even more so. There is a strong temptation—especially when thinking about *teaching* modernist poetry—to leave Pound on the shelf, so to speak, to draw our conclusions and so let him be forgotten, given the problematic or simply abhorrent character of his politics (a character that has only become more clear to us thanks to the work of Nicholls and other scholars).¹⁵ But this is not, in fact, Pound’s poetic legacy. As Nicholls explains, “his writings have become the seedbed of a whole range of different poetries” and “a counter-tradition to the one associated in America with Eliot and the New Critics” precisely because his “work has suggested different paths to different poets.”¹⁶ The poets that come “after” Pound do so in complex ways, and, despite the “political content of his work,” they “have still found themselves able to learn from him, extrapolating stylistic and epistemological techniques which they have pursued to very different ends.”¹⁷

From the second volume of this collection, one gets the impression that the multifariousness of this “after Pound” is possible precisely because of the failure of the *Cantos* as a historical project. For Pound does not appear here as a *model* for the kind of poetics that the book explores. (That is not the kind of “figure” he is and that is not how we or the later poets are to be understood learning from him.) Rather, Pound here works as a *cipher* of a certain kind of western modernity as

15 For a helpful discussion of Pound’s politics that supplements the essays in these volumes, see Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics, and Writing* (London: MacMillan, 1984).

16 “Beyond the *Cantos*,” 259.

17 “Beyond the *Cantos*,” 259.

much as a figure of it. Ciphering is, like some figurative writing or speech, a way of communicating in code, in secret, or in disguise, as Pound frequently (and contradictorily) found himself doing, especially in his later poetry. But a cipher is also like a figure in that it has numeric value, though its value is no value at all—a zero, null, blank or nonentity. The collapse of Pound’s historically informed poetics affirms or reveals something about history itself to his contemporaries and successors and opens up the “different paths” and possibilities that later poets pursued, among these what Nicholls calls in the final chapter of the second volume “numerousness.” It is perhaps not surprising that of all the “figures” in *Modernist Figures*, it was the *Rückenfigur*—ironically appropriated from romantic art into the poetics of the late twentieth century—that stood out the most for me, the figure that promises artistic passage but whose face is always turned away from us and thus becomes “as resistant to meaning as the figural quality of writing.”¹⁸

How should we read and how should we teach literary modernism now? The essays collected in the two volumes of *Modernist Figures* not only explore a rich array of interpretive approaches, they also offer readers pedagogical strategies for a present still wracked by the shock of the new. The question of how to teach modernism surfaces all of the quandaries associated with its complicated relations to temporality and presentness. Can modernist poetry give us access to the past? For students the challenge of making sense of these difficult and exciting texts often seems to involve digging up the past, a seemingly pedestrian archaeological exercise that might be delegated to someone else or even a machine. Or

18 Volume 2, Chapter 26, “‘The Pastness of Landscape’: Susan Howe’s *Pierce-Arrow*,” 360.

our students' discomfort with the opacity and recalcitrance of modernist texts may lead them to the desire for a reassuring master code that ushers them away from the intense pleasures and rewards of dwelling with difficulty and exploring their own interpretive activity. But as Nicholls demonstrates through his own inventive and instructive acts of reading, modernist figures have been refusing for over a century the deprivations involved in resorting to prosaic paraphrase and the reduction of the poetic to the merely discursive.

These are pressing questions given the contemporary's especially fraught relationship to history, what the past should mean to us now and whether or how it should be reckoned with—questions that animated much of literary modernism itself and thus, perhaps, connect us still to those forms of modernism even as they recede ever further into the past we aim to confront. Despite the remarkable and vibrant expansion of approaches in modernist studies, the term modernism itself at times seems to risk extinction. Yet there continues to be great interest in these texts from our undergraduate and graduate students. In historical periodization, pedagogy, and continued research modernism is at a crossroads. But perhaps it always was—or is even constitutive of a crossroads. These volumes teach us that the discovery of “something new” might also reveal the limitations and aporias of “the way we think now.”

Acknowledgments

The essays collected in the two volumes of *Modernist Figures* span a thirty-year period; my debts to friends who have read and commented upon them are, accordingly, extensive and impossible to repay. My deep gratitude goes to Laura Marcus and to Majorie Perloff whose wisdom and humor were a constant encouragement. They are both keenly missed in their recent passing. Other friends have been equally generous with their knowledge and expertise. My thanks to Peter Boxall, Sara Crangle, Patrick Deer, Richard Godden, Peter Middleton, Zakir Paul, Richard Sieburth, Marion Thain, and Henry Weinfield whose brilliant conversation and advice over many years have been truly without price. I am grateful, too, to Matthew Feldman for initiating the project that has issued in these two volumes.

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Introduction: Speaking in Figures

Poetry, especially in the modern period, has frequently presented itself as some kind of counterforce to what Herman Melville memorably called a “bantering, barren and prosaic, heartless age.”¹ Against the coercive certainties of public discourse, poetry offers difficulty, strangeness, a resistance to the commercial idiom of everyday life and the “heartlessness” it tends to encourage. Poetry’s artful deviations from “ordinary” speech work to expose the limits to imaginative freedom that lie concealed within the spaces of a too-familiar world. To adapt Nietzsche, poetry may encourage us “to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.”² Modern poetry is born, we might say, of a skeptical poetics. It doubts, it treads warily, it knows that what at first may seem like empty “bantering” can as quickly become a brutal exchange of political *idées fixes*. Poetry, of course, is deeply distrustful of such displays, but the skeptical distance it cultivates speaks not for lyric privacy but for vigilance, and often for antagonism. The “liars in public places” that Ezra Pound had castigated in 1920 are still with us;³ the din notwithstanding, poets work tirelessly to

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- 1 Herman Melville, *Pierre*, in *Pierre*, Israel Potter, *The Confidence-Man*, *Tales*, *Billy Budd* (New York: The Library of American, 1984), 162.
 - 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.
 - 3 Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)*, in *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 208.

preserve nuance and multiplicity, to keep alive the possibility that not all Nietzsche's doors have been slammed shut.

My title for these volumes, *Modernist Figures*, refers both to the literary figures who created twentieth-century art and to the stylistic figures through which that art became possible. To speak of *figures* in this way is, of course, to invoke rhetoric, the discipline which had traditionally defined and classified literary devices for writerly use. Modern criticism is not much drawn to such exercises in taxonomy, with their cumbrous Greek and Latin labels, though the rhetoricians' concern with the relation of literal to figurative has retained its importance. A more flexible approach to this might now be to consider "figure" itself, a word rooted in ideas of "shaping" and "forming."⁴ Like the related word "trope," "figure" involves a sort of "turn" away from the language of ordinary use. Yet where "trope" is usually associated with semantic substitution, "figure" implies a formal inflection, a "shaping" by sound, rhythm, syntax, repetition, perhaps even by visual presentation. In practice, these two devices cannot exist separately—in fact it is the disruptive effect of figuration on literal meaning that produces the uncertainty and ambiguity that give the arts of modernism their distinctive newness. Gilles Deleuze offers a striking image for this. The painter surveying a blank canvas does not, he says, confront an emptiness waiting to be filled, for the surface is, in fact, already "full of clichés," it is swarming with "ready-made ideas," with lines, colors, and shapes, the properties, in short, of a painting we already know. The creative task, then, must be to blur and erase these forms to allow a real "pictorial fact" to emerge

4 See Eric Auerbach, "Figura" (1938), in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11: "Originally *figura*, from the same stem as *ingere*, *figulus*, *fictor*, and *effigies*, meant 'plastic form'."

which Deleuze calls “the Figure” and defines as “an image without resemblance.”⁵

With a certain avant-gardist sleight of hand, Deleuze manages a clean dissociation of “figure” from “cliché,” though as we shall see in some of the essays that follow, the longstanding association of figuration with rhetoric may also link it to persuasion, ornament, and even to deception. This tension is acutely felt in the work of Ezra Pound whose poetry relies heavily on figuration even as it roundly condemns rhetorical excess. Some lines that appear late in his long poem, *The Cantos*, give a preliminary hint of the contradictions involved:

S doing evil in place of the R
 “A pity that poets have used symbol and metaphor
 and no man learned anything from them
 for their speaking in figures.”⁶

These lines are from the first of two passages entitled “Addendum for [Canto] C,” both of which are dated “Circa 1941.”⁷ The lines had first appeared as part of a section entitled “Canto Proceeding (72 Circa)” in the little magazine *Vice Versa* in 1942 and in reprinting them Pound made several changes. The first version read as follows:

Sassoon doing evil in place of the Rothschild
 Till it is pity that poets have hitherto used symbol and metaphor

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- 5 Gilles Deleuze, *On Painting*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Charles J. Stivale (1981; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 40, 46, 90.
 6 *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 799.
 7 The second passage beginning “Now sun rises in Ram sign” first appeared in a letter (12 March 1941) to Katue Kitasono as “Lines to go into Canto 72 or somewhere”—see *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 348. For discussion, see Peter Stoicheff, *The Hall of Mirrors: Drafts & Fragments and the End of Ezra Pound’s Cantos* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 63-4. Canto LXXII would, in fact, be written in Italian.

Modernist Figures

and no man learned anything from them
for their speaking in figures.⁸

The later version presents the complaint about poets “speaking in figures” as a quotation, though no source for the lines has ever been proposed. When first printed without quotation marks, however, the lines had had a more polemical edge, naming the guilty financiers directly rather than hiding them behind “symbol and metaphor” as, allegedly, poets had done “hitherto.” The later version of the passage acquires some new, more reflexive ironies: Pound’s publisher, New Directions, had followed legal advice and redacted the names of Sassoon and Rothschild, so effectively undermining the poet’s original claim to plain speaking. Perhaps this is why the complaint now appears as a quotation—it is no longer a judgment made *by* Pound but a judgment obliquely made *of* him. And when we look at the passage in full, we can see why, for it is as if the editorial redactions force the poet to acknowledge that his own tirade against usury must resort to the very “speaking in figures” that this passage will shortly regret. The “Addendum” is, in fact (like the earlier Cantos XLV and LI), replete with “symbol and metaphor,” with personification and alliteration: “The Evil is Usury, *neschek* / The serpent / *Neschek*,” and so on.⁹ Pound then observes that whereas “All other sins are open, / Usury alone not understood” (799)—not understood, that is, because, like rhetorical embellishment, from which “no man [has] learned anything,” usury comes to us tricked out in symbol and metaphor, always presenting itself “in terms of something else”.¹⁰

8 Pound, “Canto Proceeding (72 Circa),” *Vice Versa*, VIII (1942), 2.

9 Pound, *The Cantos*, 798.

10 Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (Hessle: The Marvell Press, 1960), 117: “The Renaissance sought a realism and attained it. It rose in a search for

In fact, as Robert Casillo observes, “the concept of usury is already constituted, contaminated, and overdetermined by metaphor,”¹¹ so we might say that, obstructing “openness,” usury ensures its own presentation in “figures” like Dante’s Geryon (invoked in Pound’s Canto LI /251) or the shape-shifting serpent of the “Addendum.” Usury, not surprisingly, finds its twin in “rhetoric” and both revel in the flourish that adds superfluous “ornament” to a “simple” original.¹² The “Addendum” provides a dramatic example of this, defining usura as the source of malignant excrescences and bulbous swellings: “Wart of the common-weal, / Wenn-maker.” The sound of these lines is not at all that of the song “sharp and light in the throat” for which Pound had praised Cavalcanti (“we have in him no rhetoric”¹³); instead, it alliteratively chokes the throat as if with “slime.”

When a poet condemns “speaking in figures,” as Pound does here, we might think that he rejects the very conditions of his art, leaving silence as the only option (and it was an option that Pound himself dramatically chose in old age). But Pound had previously recognized the essential doubleness of figure: it could be the rhetorical ornament added just for effect or it could be a “shaping” force within the verse that

precision and declined through rhetoric and rhetorical thinking, through a habit of defining things ‘in terms of something else.’”

- 11 Robert Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 221.
- 12 Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 191: “The ‘beauty’ is not applied ornament, but makes the mental image more definite.”
- 13 Pound, “Cavalcanti” (1910-31), in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed., T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 170; Pound, “Introduction” to *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* (1912), in David Anderson, ed., *Pound’s Cavalcanti: An Edition of the Translations, Notes, and Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 12.

turned it away from ordinary speech. This was the lesson he had taken from Cavalcanti's verse:

In Guido the 'figure', the strong metamorphic or 'picturesque' expression is there with purpose to convey or to interpret a definite meaning. In Petrarch it is ornament, the prettiest ornament he could find, but not an irreplaceable ornament, or one that he couldn't have used just about as well somewhere else. In fact he very often does use it, and them, somewhere, and nearly everywhere, else, all over the place.¹⁴

Here "figure" is distinguished from "ornament" because it is "interpretive," it analyzes emotion rather than simply expresses it. "Ornament," on the other hand, is a mere supplement to meaning and has no intrinsic relation to its context, being (like money) transportable from one place to another merely to add "prettiness." Ornament by this account is another kind of cliché: both are imprecise because overused and overworn ("fustian," Pound calls Petrarchan metaphor).¹⁵

The term "figure," then, may denote either a device drawn from a familiar stylistic repertoire (its conventional character allowing it to be used "all over the place," as Pound probably thought of Petrarch using and re-using his images of fire and ice and his puns on Laura's name); or it may denote a device that disrupts or counters those conventions, producing a force that inhabits a discursive system but that remains somehow alien or foreign to it. While ornament, then, embellishes a meaning, figure works to accentuate aspects of language which might qualify and unsettle it. Thinking of Guido's "metamorphic" metaphor, Pound recalled an old fantasy, that sculpture could conceal a divine form inside

14 Pound, "Cavalcanti," 154. In the same essay (161), Pound also proposed that the Canzone "is a sort of metaphor on the generation of light."

15 Ibid., 162.

it, a “non-plastic idea,” he noted, but one from which the work derives its “force”:

The force is arrested, but there is never any question about its latency, about the force being the essential, and the rest ‘accidental’ in the philosophic technical sense. The shape occurs [...]. This sculpture with something inside, revives in the Quattrocento portrait bust. But the antecedents are in verbal manifestation.”¹⁶

Compare Roland Barthes’ contention that “literature must secrete itself in a system which does not belong to it but which nonetheless functions to the same ends as literature, which are: to communicate.”¹⁷ Figure—Barthes here equates it with literature itself—is within discourse but not of it; “secreted” there, it works against the “fulfillment” of meaning, he says, using “language to constitute a world which is emphatically signifying but never finally signified.”¹⁸

Some of Barthes’ ideas appear again in Gérard Genette’s influential series of essays called *Figures* (1969-70). Genette notes there how the study of rhetoric since antiquity had always considered these devices “as ways of speaking removed from those that are natural and ordinary,”¹⁹ and the culmination of that tradition in the great manual of Pierre Fontanier (*Les figures du discours* [1821-30]) reminds us that the figurative had thus always taken second place to the literal

16 Pound, “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 152, 153.

17 Roland Barthes, “Literature and Signification: Answers to a Questionnaire in *Tel Quel*,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 266.

18 Ibid, 268.

19 Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 48

as a “deviation” from the norm of “simple, common expression”.²⁰ While restating this basic principle, however, Fontanier departed from the classical understanding of rhetoric as a means of persuasion, and advocated instead the use of figures to bring increased clarity and emphasis to otherwise “ordinary” propositional statements. Of course, if such features can be added, they can also be removed, and Fontanier’s figures remain entwined with discourse in so far as they are always translatable back into the literal sense from which they have “deviated.”

In his own consideration of these topics, Genette breaks with the old distinction between literal and figurative and thus calls in question the kind of “translation” that Fontanier’s theory had assumed. For Genette, as for Barthes, meaning in the literary text is instead something postponed or deferred, and where Fontanier saw figures as a way of giving greater intelligibility to discourse, Genette values their capacity to unsettle the fixed meanings of “social speech”:

Its [literature’s] *art* consists entirely in making language, a vehicle of knowledge and rather hasty opinion, a locus of uncertainty and interrogation. It suggests that the world signifies, but “without saying *what*”; it describes objects and people, relates events, and instead of imposing on them definite, fixed significations, as does social speech (and also, of course, “bad” literature), it leaves them, or rather restores to them, by a very subtle technique (which is still to be studied) of semantic evasion, that “shaky” [*tremblé*], ambiguous, uncertain meaning, which is their truth. Thus it *breathes new life into the world*, freeing it from the pressure of social meaning, which is a named meaning, and therefore a dead meaning, maintaining as long as possible that opening, that *uncertainty of signs*, which allows one to breathe.²¹

20 Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, introd. Gérard Genette (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 64, quoted in Genette, *Figures*, 47.

21 Genette, *Figures*, 41 (emphases in original). Genette borrows several phrases from Barthes here—see his “Literature and Signification,” 268

Literary figures are here envisaged as a means of “semantic evasion,” a phrase suggesting not the dissolution of meaning, but a rewriting of it by a “shaky” hand (as *écriture tremblée*) whose uncertain movement makes the text “a monument of reticence and ambiguity.”²² It may seem that Genette is just celebrating symbolist suggestiveness here, but the uncertainty he evokes in fact goes deeper, implying a skepticism toward language as “a vehicle of knowledge” that also constitutes the ideational matrix of literary modernism. My first two essays explore this in the work of Melville and Swinburne, showing that while skepticism can be expressed with varying degrees of absoluteness, when it underwrites a new poetics it works to put pressure on the truth-claims of “social speech,” exposing them to the acids of uncertainty and (to borrow Barthes’s word) “unfulfillment.” Both Melville and Swinburne, in very different ways, develop purposefully digressive forms of writing that keep possibilities in play and celebrate the doubt and indirection that characterize skeptical thinking. In the next century, the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti would discern precisely in the “uncertain,” mirage-like forms of Giacomo Leopardi’s verse the presage of an authentically “modern” poetry, a poetry prefiguring the modernism of writers to come like Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry. The essay “Foreign Poems” (below, Volume 1, 105-42) shows how the language of poetry was felt, increasingly, to be haunted by something “other” or alien to it; Mallarmé thought of it as “an internal mirage created by the words

for the equation of “a named meaning” with “a dead meaning,” and 267 for the idea that literature “permits us to breathe.”

22 Genette, *Figures*, 41; Genette, *Figures: essais* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 204: “ce sens *tremblé*, ambigu, indéfini, qui est leur vérité.”

themselves,” while Valéry called it “a language within a language.”²³ The mirage is, perhaps, an ideal figure for the doubtful thinking that can result from what Genette calls “semantic evasion,” postponing meaning and making it ambiguous. Such figural effects, we may note again, are immanent or (Pound’s word) latent within the poem’s language, not ornamentation added to it.

These possibilities are given a more radical twist in Jean-François Lyotard’s *Discours, figure* (1978) where the “figural” component does not now just “evade” meaning, as Genette suggests, but constitutes something completely irreducible to it. Lyotard proposes this as a rebuttal of Hegel’s attempt to “absorb the exteriority of the perceived world into the interiority of language.”²⁴ As an expression of that exteriority, the figural, according to Lyotard, inhabits discourse -- “language and its other are inseparable,” he says²⁵—but, crucially, it retains its “otherness” and thereby resists traditional assumptions about language’s mastery of meaning and experience. In a critique of Saussure’s “closed” linguistic system, predicated on a network of equivalences and oppositions, Lyotard observes that “all discourse is projected in the direction of something which it tries to seize, and that it is

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- 23 Mallarmé, *Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 86-7; Valéry, “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 63-4: “strange discourse, as though made by someone *other* than the speaker and addressed to someone *other* than the listener. In short, it is a *language within a language*.” Original emphases.
- 24 Peter Dews, “The Letter and the Line: Discourse and Its Other in Lyotard,” *diacritics*, 14, 3 (Fall 1984), 42.
- 25 Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (1971; Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1985), 64 (my translation).

incomplete and open, rather as the visual field is partial, limited and extended by a horizon.”²⁶ The figure, then, belongs to those sensory and unconscious orders of experience of which language cannot give a full account; it brings to prominence those “material” aspects of expression—visual, phonic, rhythmic—that cannot be reduced to a meaning or a truth.²⁷

Lyotard gives few literary examples to illustrate the workings of the figural, and these tend to be works in which, like Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*, the visual presentation of the text “render[s] expressive a space normally destined to be overlooked.”²⁸ But the idea of a non-semantic “other” working within poetic language is equally striking in regard to rhythm and sound where the figural defines the very movement of the text as it takes shape for the reader. Leopardi and Swinburne were both expert prosodists, but arguably they became properly “modern” poets only as they recognized that true poetic music originated *inside* the poem rather than in externally imposed metrical or rhyming schemes. Both writers, of course, continued to acknowledge prosodic constraints, but both also came to supplement these with a variety of internal phonic and syntactical devices. Leopardi, for example, began to use fewer rhymes and when they occurred they were not always closely related, sometimes resounding across many lines or even strophes; they became, in short, altogether less predictable, as even a “perfect” rhyme could

26 Ibid., 32 (my translation).

27 Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge 1991), 151. Lyotard rejects, of course, Lacan’s conception of the unconscious as “structured like a language,” seeing it instead as an assemblage of forces and drives.

28 Lyotard, *Discours/figure*, 65 (my translation). 64. “Overlooked,” that is, when the text is read primarily in terms of signification.

be unsettled by its distance from a partner. Leopardi's development of the "free canzone" (*canzone libera*) was, in fact, a means by which to undermine readerly anticipation, and his poetry would look increasingly not to rhyme schemes that satisfy expectation but to effects that could produce a level of creative uncertainty in the progress of the poem. Unrhymed lines proliferate in Leopardi's poems, seven-syllable lines start to outnumber eleven-syllable ones, assonance and alliteration become decisive, and enjambment more frequently carries the reader across line-endings where a pause might be expected. Figures now do not just amplify meaning, but hold it in suspension, freeing the imagination, as Leopardi says, to "wander": "Variety, uncertainty [*l'incertezza*], not seeing everything, and therefore being able to wander in one's imagination through things unseen, all contribute to this pleasure."²⁹ Such "wandering" produces pleasure because the poem has drawn us into its inner music, freeing us momentarily from the obligation of "seeing everything" that the external world imposes.

This inward turn is not, however, a turn toward the purely subjective; in fact, it is quite the opposite, producing an impersonal "voice" freed from the self's priorities and preferring generality to lyric particularity. Later, Valéry will call this the "figure of thought" which in Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* bestows on thought a certain exteriority, making it something seen, as it were, from outside. Marveling at the extraordinary layout of that poem, Valéry finds himself "looking at the form and pattern of a thought [*la figure d'une pensée*],

29 Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2013), 1745.

placed for the first time in finite space.”³⁰ Glossing this passage, Lyotard proposes that “Mallarmé radically deprives articulated language of its prosaic function of communication, revealing in it a power that exceeds it: the power to be ‘seen,’ and not only read-heard, the power to figure, and not only to signify.”³¹ Again, Lyotard attends primarily to the visual implications of the figure, but we should add that in Valéry’s formulation it also articulates a certain temporality: “Here,” he says, “space itself truly spoke, dreamed and gave birth to temporal forms. Expectancy, doubt, concentration, all were *visible things*.”³² Valéry gives us here a vivid sense of the contour and texture of modernist thinking. Poetic language by this account will never be comfortably at one with itself, divided as it always is between meaning and its “other,” and thus suspended in rhythms of doubt, hesitation, and anticipation. Nowhere, perhaps, is this clearer than in the modernist pursuit of the new which so often turns out to be also a pursuit of the “now,” of the poem as creating “the impression of something happening now, in the immediate time of discourse.”³³ Writers as different as Paul Celan, George Oppen, and Yves Bonnefoy all speak of the poet’s ambition in these terms, though their own work demonstrates with great scruple that to speak of presence is also to speak of it from a skeptical distance. What Jacques Derrida called a “metaphysics of presence” certainly has its place in literary modernism—we can discern it in, say, the epiphanic poetics of Futurism and Imagism—but modernism also contains a

30 Valéry, *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 309.

31 Lyotard, *Discours/figure*, 61 (my translation).

32 Valéry, *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, 309 (his emphasis).

33 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 37).

substantial countercurrent of materialism that emphasizes human and artistic limits and gratefully acknowledges the intractability of the material world. The dream of presence exerts a powerful pull in lyric poetry, though as Derrida also notes in his reading of Celan, the “punctual living present” always harbors something alien or nonidentical within itself.

“Presence,” of course, might be construed more literally as just a tense—Gertrude Stein’s “continuous present,” for example—but that tense becomes the medium not so much for psychological insights as for the appearance of experience as writing. It is what Virginia Woolf means in *The Waves* when she talks about waiting for “the thing to be said as if it were written, to see the sentence lay its dab of clay precisely on the right place, making character.”³⁴ That again speaks for the priority of the “figure,” the “dab of clay” that honors “character” while removing it from “life.” It is exteriority that is valued, something to be found also in Wyndham Lewis’s very different appreciation of satire as an inorganic art. Mina Loy, a satirist also, regarded the language she wrote as essentially “foreign,” viscous and unassimilable to the forms of everyday speech.³⁵ Like Joyce and Djuna Barnes, she was a devotee of the dictionary and a lover of opaque and unusable words (her “lexicophilia” echoes, perhaps, Baudelaire’s self-diagnosed “lexicomania”³⁶). The desire to see one’s own writing as something “foreign” is a recurrent theme in modernism. It explains the failure of the Surrealist project in Britain

34 Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. Kate Flint (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), 151.

35 See Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 361 where Loy is quoted: “I was trying to make a foreign language because English had already been used.”

36 Baudelaire: *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 261.

where the effort was instead to domesticate the new continental arts by assimilating them to a homegrown romanticism; and it explains, too, the more successful inflection of the Surrealist mode in Lorine Niedecker's radical experiments with sound and rhythm. Niedecker, like her friend Louis Zukofsky, was another dictionary enthusiast for whom obscure words provided ready passageways into the unconscious. In her rural isolation, she was also reading French avant-garde poets like Jean Daive and André du Bouchet, admiring their creation of sound-shapes that she thought comparable to her own and reckoning with their austere sense of linguistic impenetrability. For du Bouchet, a translator convinced of the impossibility of translation, all languages were foreign, even his own French.

And Ezra Pound? Amidst all this talk of hesitation and uncertainty, he was certainly decisive and outspoken. He was after all the inventor of Imagism and its program of "direct presentation" and objectivity, a program designed to combat the "slither" he associated with most Victorian poetry and with French Symbolism. Yet Pound was nothing if not contradictory, and while he was indeed this passionate advocate of clarity and definition, he was also profoundly attracted to things hidden and occult. The enigma of *The Cantos* is, perhaps, that a poetics of "objectivity" might cohabit with a poetics of uncertainty and ambiguity of the kind outlined above. And contradictions proliferate: Pound, as his career so dramatically shows, could be at one moment the ideological megaphone and purveyor of racist banalities, and, at another, the connoisseur of musical velleities and the possessor of a legendarily fine ear. Pound was in that sense protean, and the essays collected here acknowledge that by attending as much to his ideological excesses (especially in his

wartime Italian journalism and in the late Cantos) as to his imaginative achievements as a poet (his work with Japanese Noh, for example, his translations of Cavalcanti, and his responsiveness to the mosaics of Ravenna).

But if *The Cantos* convinces of anything, it is that these disparate elements are one, that like components of an ideogram they (somehow) hang together. In the last complete Canto he wrote (CXVI), Pound declares: "I have brought the great ball of crystal; who can lift it?" The answer, perhaps, is "no one," if this task of heavy lifting means also to activate the poem or to resolve its many contradictions. Yet that we might not be able to lift it means that it must sit there, immovable but impossible to ignore. So, arguably, *The Cantos* has become an often mute but nonetheless insistent *point de repère* for writers seeking in literature a lens through which to read history. Here Pound's errors have proved more instructive than his teachings, for where "history" was, for him, a repository of ascertainable fact and narrative "design," for younger writers the effort has been to keep "history" open and multiple rather than to accept it as something preemptively sealed by voices of authority. As Lyotard puts it, "to fight against forgetting means to fight to remember that one forgets as soon as one believes, draws conclusions, and holds for certain."³⁷ A legible history, then, a history fully amenable to interpretation, is a history already forgotten and destined to the archive. Writers after Pound—my examples here are Toni Morrison and Susan Howe—have grasped the figural as a means by which to preserve the pain the past brings with it rather than allowing it to congeal into a "forgettable" and orderly narrative. For both writers, the past is precarious, a

37 Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 10.

minefield of misunderstandings and ambiguities, but a space nonetheless which memory and desire can still configure as a partially open question. Is this what it means, to remember while holding nothing for certain? That paradox is ultimately a poetic one—poetic, at least, in not being about reaching conclusions, but rather, as Lyn Hejinian has it in her book *Happily*, about things happening, which is to say about things beginning rather than repeating themselves.

Part 1:
Points of Departure

Herman Melville: Skepticism, Cynicism, and the Memoirs of a Greek

On October 11, 1849, Herman Melville boarded the *Southampton* in New York for a keenly awaited trip to London and the Continent. He was by this time the author of four novels—*Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), and *Redburn* (1849)—and now had a fifth, *White-Jacket*, in manuscript for which he hoped to find an English publisher. As ever, he was in need of money (*Redburn* he claimed to have written as simply a cash-making “thing”),¹ and the situation was serious now that he had a wife and child to support. The *Journal* of this rather brief visit—Melville returned to New York on January 30, 1850—gives us a rich and multifaceted view of the author’s state of mind at this time. He had long wanted to see London, having failed to go there during an earlier visit to England, and the journal gives a lively record of his activities as tourist and socialite. Melville was also in search of copy, and he approached London with a project in mind that would later become the novel *Israel Potter* (1855), the “Revolutionary narrative of the beggar.”² The sea-trip itself, though, was also an experience to be savored, “reminding [him] of old times” as a sailor (*J*, p.5) as well as introducing

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- 1 For the dismissal of *Redburn* as “a thing, which I, the author, know to be trash, & wrote it to buy some tobacco with,” see Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 vols (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), I, p.650.
 - 2 Melville, *Journals*, ed. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1989), p. 43. Further references will be given in the text to *J*.

him to new intellectual topics. With fellow travelers he discussed “Lamertine [*sic*] and [Madame de Staël’s] Corinne” (*J*, p.9) and fell into companionable philosophical speculation with a Professor of German, George Adler, who was “full of the German metaphysics, & discourses of Kant, Swedenborg &c” (*J*, p.4).³ Adler was, said Melville, his “principal companion thus far” in his journey, and the two men would continue to enjoy their heady dialogue in London and Paris. With land-fall, though, metaphysical speculation had to yield to inquiries of a more pragmatic kind, as Melville began to hawk his manuscript from publisher to publisher. The sense of desperation that threads through the narrative—“Proposed the book. No go” (*J*, p.26)—made Melville perhaps especially sensitive to the poverty and squalor of the great metropolis. London struck him as having a decidedly infernal aspect; it was “a city of Dis (Dante’s) clouds of smoke—the damned &c—coal barges—coaly waters, cast iron Duke &c its marks are left upon you, &c &c &c” (*J*, p.14).⁴ The horrors of mid-century London life were memorably captured in a public hanging Melville witnessed: “The mob was brutish. All in all, a most wonderful, horrible, & unspeakable scene” (*J*, p.17). Yet if, like Friedrich Engels shortly before him, Melville was shocked by the “brutishness” and cynicism of public life in

3 See also *ibid.*, p. 8: “We talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c were discussed under the influence of the whiskey.” Other discussions of “high German metaphysics” are recalled in the *Journal* at p. 19, p. 33, p. 34. See also Sanford E. Marovitz, “More Chartless Voyaging: Melville and Adler at Sea,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1996), pp. 373-84.

4 The association of London with “this cindery City of Dis” is further elaborated in Chapter 24 of *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, in *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Confidence-Man, Tales, Billy Budd* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 603-5. The reference to the coal barges on the river oddly prefigures Eliot’s Thames that “sweats / Oil and tar” in *The Waste Land*.

the city, he was also enlivened by his various forays into a very different upper-class world of cultured sociality and fine dining. Melville could be ironic about the luxurious lifestyle of the Inns of Court (in the short story “The Paradise of Bachelors”) but he was actually deeply appreciative of the possibilities of genial conversation it afforded.

Much more could be said of the experiences recorded in the 1849/50 *Journal*, but I want to focus here on the more specifically literary aspect of Melville’s trip.⁵ Not only was he reading important new works at this time—Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, for example (*J*, p.41)—he was also making substantial additions to his library, and as Hershel Parker notes, “London was a bookman’s paradise.”⁶ Shortage of money remained a constraint—“Saw many books I should like to buy—but cannot” (*J*, p.43)—but Melville still managed to make some significant acquisitions, as we can see from the list he incorporated in his *Journal* (*J*, pp.144-5). The purchases catalogued and priced there may seem random and uncoordinated but on close attention they exhibit several strands of interest that would shape the composition of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the late novels. Most notably for my purpose here, they provide some generic pointers to the tensions between skepticism and cynicism that would come increasingly to characterize his fiction. It’s clear, for example, that Melville’s interest in writers of the English Renaissance continued unabated, and he took advantage of his time in London to acquire works by Jonson, Davenant, Beaumont

5 For a fuller account of the 1849/50 trip, see Parker, *Herman Melville*, I, pp.661-87. Parker has remarked elsewhere on a tendency of biographers to minimize the importance of both the 1849/50 trip and the 1856/7 one—see his *Melville Biography: An Inside Narrative* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 289-90.

6 Parker, *Herman Melville*, I, p. 675.

and Fletcher, Sir Thomas Browne, and Marlowe. Additionally, the list indicates a marked preference for prose of an “essayistic” kind such as Browne’s works, Rousseau’s “much desired” *Confessions* (J, p.40), Charles Lamb’s essays, Madame de Staël’s *Corinne*, the various volumes by Goethe, and Thomas de Quincey’s “most wondrous book,” *The Confessions of an Opium-Eater* (J, p.47). The term “essayism” has not figured prominently in Anglo-American literary criticism and we perhaps tend to associate it most directly with the Austrian novelist Robert Musil who, in his unfinished novel sequence *A Man Without Qualities* (1930-43), memorably celebrates the speculative capacity of the genre and the semantic connection between “essay” and “assay.”⁷ The novel’s protagonist Ulrich is fascinated by, he says, “the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept....”⁸ The essay may be known for its relative brevity, then, but its power actually derives, paradoxically, from its discursive “scope,” from its capacity to reveal interconnections rather than to “melt down” its thoughts to

7 The original conjunction of meanings originates, of course, with Montaigne’s *Essais*. See, for example, Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 279: “the word *essai* is one of the thematic motifs through which the personified author *attempts* to dominate his foreign materials” (his emphasis). “Essayism” as a critical term has occasionally been applied to the work of Virginia Woolf: see Elena Gualtieri, “The Essay as Form: Virginia Woolf and the Literary Tradition,” *Textual Practice*, 12, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 49-67 and Randi Saloman, *Virginia Woolf’s Essayism* (New York: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

8 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, 2 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995), I, p. 270.

a conclusion.⁹ It is, we might, say the favored form for a skeptical “anti-philosophy” that ostentatiously parades its stylistic and rhetorical features instead of seeking to conceal them beneath an impersonal display of propositional logic and conceptual hierarchy.¹⁰ Not for nothing does Musil say of his essayist hero that “He was no philosopher. Philosophers are despots who have no armies to command, so they subject the world to their tyranny by locking it up in a system of thought.”¹¹

Melville in his early fiction had sought, rather similarly, to break the hold of any “despotic” system. The rambling, hedonistic journeying that is the key trope of *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi* creates a form in which we are hardly at all “reading for the plot,” to borrow Peter Brooks’s phrase.¹² Indeed, the

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- 9 See also Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), I, pp. 3-23.
 - 10 See, for example, George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought: from Hellenism to Celan* (New York: New Directions, 2011), p. 52: “all philosophy is style. No philosophic proposition outside formal logic is separate from its semantic means and context. Nor is it totally translatable...” (his emphasis). Stanley Cavell has noted tendencies toward what he calls the “counter-philosophical”—see his *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 193. Cavell has also spoken of “a pre-philosophical moment” in mid-nineteenth-century American culture “when philosophy and literature and theology (and politics and economics) had not isolated themselves from one another, but when these divorcements could be felt as imminent, for better or worse”—see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. xiii-xiv.
 - 11 Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, I, p. 272.
 - 12 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). See also Claire De Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 198 on the idea that in “the novels of Proust, Broch, or Musil, essaying visibly competes with and hinders the possibility of narrating or of lending experience a definite meaning, and this materializes as a disintegration of both the narrative syntagm and the unified (Cartesian) subject.” Cf. Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, I, p.

digressive turn from the path of narrative is an increasingly striking feature of Melville's work, with *Mardi* drawing on his recent reading of Rabelais to produce a pervasive generic confusion, as fiction folds into dramatic dialogue and narrative is absorbed into authorial commentary.¹³ While most contemporary critics and readers would come to regard Melville's essayistic impulse as a sign of mere self-indulgence and eccentricity, his cultivation of it was in fact purposeful and intensive. He had purchased Montaigne's *Essays* early in 1848,¹⁴ and at the same time he also borrowed two volumes of works by Sir Thomas Browne from his friend Evert Duyckinck.¹⁵ Some of the book purchases made in London the next year would consolidate Melville's fascination with mixed forms and help to shape the essayistic tendencies of *Moby-Dick*. And it was in just this spirit that he later described his labors on the novel to his new friend Nathaniel

709: "It now came to Ulrich that he had lost this elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life still clings, even though everything in public life has already ceased to be narrative and no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out as an infinitely interwoven surface."

- 13 See Brian Foley, "Herman Melville and the Example of Sir Thomas Browne," *Modern Philology*, 81. 3 (1984), p. 267. Cf. Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 92: the essay "appears, then, as the moment of writing *before* genre, before genericness—or as the matrix of all generic possibilities" (emphasis in original). See also Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Janet E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 259 on "the invasion of story by commentary, novel by essay, narrative by discourse."
- 14 See Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville 1819-1891* (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), 2 vols, Vol. I, p. 269. It is generally thought that Melville bought Charles Cotton's translation in Hazlitt's one-volume *Works of Michael Montaigne* (London, 1842). See especially Aretta J. Stevens, "The Edition of Montaigne Read by Melville," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 62. 1 (1968), pp. 130-4.
- 15 *The Melville Log*, I, p. 273.