The Ethics of Ekphrasis: The Turn to Responsible Rhetoric in Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry

Joshua Scott Steffey

Marquette University

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THE ETHICS OF EKPHRASIS: THE TURN TO RESPONSIBLE RHETORIC
IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

by

Joshua S. Steffey, A.B., M.A.

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ABSTRACT

THE ETHICS OF EKPHRASIS: THE TURN TO RESPONSIBLE RHETORIC IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

Joshua S. Steffey, A.B., M.A.

Marquette University, 2011

In this dissertation, I argue that poets of the late modernist period were engaged in an effort to reevaluate the early modernist aesthetics of autonomy and to redirect poetry to the ethical problems faced by a world torn by war, genocidal politics, and violent cultural exclusions predicated on race and other arbitrary markers of identity. In particular, I focus on how prominent mid-century American or somewhat Americanized poets—Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop—deploy rhetorical strategies associated with ekphrasis to meet these ethical crises. Each of these late modernist, formalist poets makes a strategic turn toward a self-critical poetry in order to imagine a mode of poetic speech that can reflect and accommodate the cultural differences and otherness in a society that might seem otherwise incapable of taking account of the great variety of perspectives on which it is based. As such, the turn to responsible rhetoric in mid-twentieth century American poetry is not merely a “return” to rhetoric, but a reevaluation and reimagining of rhetorical procedures. I call this the “turn” of responsible rhetoric, the rhetorical “torsion” to which poets submit their language in order to wrest modern poetry from the grip of an aesthetics of autonomy and open it, again, to communication with otherness.

What is most surprising in their rhetorical experimentation is that these poets should consistently reclaim ekphrasis, a mode emblematic of the solipsistic modernist lyric, as a rhetorical strategy for staging the encounter between a text and that which is other to it both culturally and semiotically. By appropriating this strategy and taking it beyond its ordinary high aesthetic focus, these poets commit themselves to a community open to cultural differences and constant self-critical interrogation. Rather than simply being a genre associated with modernist aesthetic autonomy, I argue, ekphrastic rhetoric helps poets mediate political, historical, and cultural differences precisely when poetic art makes its self-inquisitive turn; that is, ekphrasis is not merely a self-referential articulation of autonomy, but a means of exploring and questioning the construction of the autonomous poem by way of a crossing into otherness. In my analysis, I lean heavily on the ethical discourse developed by such late-twentieth century philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in order to draw out the significance of these poets’ experimentation with ekphrastic rhetorical strategies and to suggest how their ethical concerns both prefigure and serve as an aesthetic counterpart to ideas later developed by these philosophers.
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Joshua S. Steffey, A.B., M.A.

Knowing well that the depths of my gratitude and indebtedness cannot be measured, I wish in this too brief space to offer my humblest acknowledgments to those individuals without whose constant support and encouragement I could not have completed this study.

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INTRODUCTION

The interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity.

And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes….This reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematizing and enveloping all things. In totalizing being, discourse qua discourse thus belies the very claim to totalize.

Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being

Whenever I encounter this passage from Emmanuel Levinas’s Otherwise than Being (1974), I am reminded of an anecdote told to me by a Russian friend while I was living in Taganrog as a Peace Corps volunteer. He explained that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn used to compose his stories in the gulag, in the absence of any writing utensils and in the interest of keeping his writing—a prohibited, subversive activity—secret, by tying elaborate knots into string, each of which he would imbue with the significance of an event or passage of thought, until in fondling each one and “retelling” it he could recite from memory an entire narrative. Together these interwoven images form the notion of a discourse continually submitted to careful crafting and disruptive interlocution that is indicative of a critical shift in modernist literature of the mid-twentieth century. As later generations of modernist writers began to suspect the aesthetics of autonomy advocated by many early modernists—an aesthetics whose abjuration of social responsibility troublingly reflected the devolution of political imagination into programs of mass violence—they sought to reclaim for a newly self-aware aesthetics the outward turn toward the other that underlies the interlocutive dimension of all language.
In this dissertation, I argue that poets of the late modernist period were engaged in an effort to reevaluate the early modernist aesthetics of autonomy and to redirect poetry to the ethical problems faced by a world torn by war, genocidal politics, and violent cultural exclusions predicated on race and other arbitrary markers of identity. In particular, I focus on how prominent mid-century American or somewhat Americanized poets—Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, Randall Jarrell, and Elizabeth Bishop—deploy rhetorical strategies associated with ekphrasis to meet these ethical crises. Each of these late modernist, formalist poets makes a strategic turn toward a self-critical poetry in order to imagine a mode of poetic speech that can reflect and accommodate the cultural differences and othernesses in a society that might seem otherwise incapable of taking account of the great variety of perspectives on which it is based. As such, the turn to responsible rhetoric in mid-twentieth century American poetry is not merely a “return” to rhetoric, but a reevaluation and reimagining of rhetorical procedures. I call this the “turn” of responsible rhetoric, the rhetorical “torsion” to which poets submit their language in order to wrest modern poetry from the grip of an aesthetics of autonomy and open it, again, to communication with otherness. This project is my attempt to locate myself in tandem with the many scholars who have sought over the last few decades, in the effort known as the “ethical turn” in criticism, to return to questions of ethical import in the interest of re-theorizing how ethics may serve a central, and not just secondary, illuminating role in the study of literature. Furthermore, this study stakes the claim that ethics already occupies this central position for the poets of the late modernist period as they set themselves to the task of remaking (in the active sense of poesis) the world in the image of a more comprehensive justice.
Early modernist poets, in pursuing objectivist (or what has alternately been called realist, organicist, or impersonal) aesthetics, called for a radical split between the figural and the persuasive functions of rhetoric. But as the world political crisis drew to a head in the 1930s and this aesthetics led inconclusively to responses that were either disturbingly quietist or violently complicit in the mobilization of totalitarian politics, the need for a reevaluation of poetry’s ethical grounding became all the more apparent. Writing against the backdrop of the particularly ugly social deprivations and horrors attending the crises of modern industrial capitalism and manifested in the economic depression of the 1930s and the advent of the politically divisive societies of the World War II and Cold War eras, early and late modernists alike were faced with a shared crisis of experience that forced them to reevaluate the sincerity of their aesthetic experimentalism. The late modernist poets I consider each experienced to varying degrees the incursion of these social pressures in their lives and sought to engage them explicitly in their work: Wallace Stevens joined the political fray when he found his early aesthetics attacked by the poetic left in the *New Masses* and, subsequent to *Ideas of Order* (1936), began to turn more explicitly to defining the social roles poetry could serve; W. H. Auden and Randall Jarrell both drew upon their personal confrontations with the “warlike whole” of midcentury culture—Auden in his brief excursions in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, in China during the Sino-Japanese War, and in postwar Germany, and Jarrell in his service as first a flyer and then a navigational flight trainer with the Army Air Force, and in his visits to postwar Europe; and Elizabeth Bishop derived a comprehensive vision of international crisis as a result of her itinerancy, often in her poems drawing upon her observations of the cultural climates of pre-World War II Europe, wartime Key West, postwar
Washington, and the turbulent economic and political realities of Brazil. Concomitant with these experiences, these poets each experiment with a shift in form that is overtly rhetorical in its emphasis and also focused on ethical concerns. Such an emphasis restores rhetoric as a multivalent structure of poetic discourse, in which figuration and persuasion are often antagonistic but always coexistent elements; however, it also turns rhetorical language back on itself to facilitate the critical evaluation of its own figures and motives.

In opting for the idea of the “turn,” rather than the “return” to rhetoric, I seek to emphasize the fundamental role ascribed by these poets to the rhetorical dimension of poetic language. The call for a rhetorical theory of modern poetics has played a determinate role in much prominent criticism of the past half century, but the contributions of such theory have often been obscured by debates over the appropriate ways to name and classify the central formal developments of twentieth-century poetry. If these debates have been motivated by a critical reappraisal of formalism or New Criticism and the desire to submit poetry to a more sophisticated historicism, they have often served counterproductively to delimit what can be said about poetry’s engagement with the historical realities of politics, ethics, and philosophy—topics too often excluded from high aesthetic formalist theory. Harold Bloom’s essentially rhetorical poetic theory, as expressed in his early works like *The Anxiety of Influence*, takes a long historical view. His reading of the *clinamen*, or the inward-turning productive swerve, at the heart of the Anglophonic poetic tradition, is an attempt to theorize the developments of post-Enlightenment lyric poetry. But as many readers have worried, this narrative of poetic revision and decline advocates a distinctly Romantic poetic ideology, which in turn limits our understanding of how twentieth-century poetry turned against that tradition. For
Marjorie Perloff, modernist poetry generally conforms to Bloom’s Romantic narrative, as she maintains that, from our critical vantage, “we can see that Modernist ‘objectivity’ or ‘impersonality’ was no more than an extreme version of the interiority [or Romantic subjectivity] it claimed to reject” (179). As she therefore privileges a rhetorical counter-tradition of postmodernism as the means of overcoming the “impasse of lyric” experienced in the modernist period, Perloff argues that

Postmodernism in poetry begins in the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded—political, ethical, historical, philosophical—to the domain of poetry, which is to say that the Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystallized into...timeless patterns, gives way to a poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse and prose. (180-81)

Like Bloom’s, her theory is problematic because it relies on a highly selective reading of twentieth-century poets—namely, Pound and, to a lesser extent, William Carlos Williams and George Oppen, as well as the Language poets of the later decades of the twentieth-century—and fails to account for the role of rhetoric in the formalist poetics of the mid-century.

Other critics come closer to the rhetorical focus I am here calling for, though again they often disagree on terminological frames. In contradistinction to Perloff, Charles Altieri takes a more dialectical approach to twentieth-century American poetry, one that seems to me more attentive to the varieties of rhetorical invention in modernist poetics. In particular, he delineates an embattled history of modernist conceptions of rhetoric, with later generations finding themselves reluctant to forswear the achievements of the early modernist aesthetics of autonomy even as they “realized that they could not continue maintaining the sharp modernist distinctions between poetry and rhetoric”
Altieri perceives a resurgence of rhetoric in late modernist formalists who “tried to reformulate their strategies to elaborate new ways for poetry to take social responsibility,” primarily through employing “the constructive and performative aspects of rhetoric…to establish identifications with what it feels like to construct possibilities for changes of heart” (3, 128). Mutlu Konuk Blasing similarly privileges the rhetorical dimension of mid-twentieth century poetry, though she attributes this to the birth of a postmodern aesthetics. Unlike Perloff’s postmodernism, which excludes many of the developments of modernism while also recapitulating an organicist reduction and dismissal of rhetoric for the sake of presentational immediacy and scientific truth, Blasing mediates the early modernist radical split between rhetoric as figuration and rhetoric as persuasion: “Poetic rhetoric is figuration and persuasion at once, and each function of poetic language keeps exceeding the other, which excess sets in motion uncontrollable side effects” (Politics 21). Whereas, in her view, modernist poetics always seeks to diminish or subvert these threatening side effects through a perversion of the rhetorical, postmodern aesthetics preserves the necessarily “contaminated” space of the rhetorical, which is neither wholly aesthetic nor political. Thus, Blasing makes a compelling case for attending to the formalist poetics that Perloff would overlook or too easily dismiss as the dead-end of Romantic lyricism precisely on the grounds that there is a rhetorical or critical edge to the purely aesthetic text. “The more nonutilitarian and special poetic language sounds, the more it represents itself as convention-bound and emphasizes its own figuration,” Blasing avers, “the more it fulfills its unique and generic, inherently critical political function” (Politics 19).
For the most part, I have attempted to avoid the terminological turf wars between “modernism” and “postmodernism” by writing (in terms that I hope are more descriptive than prescriptive) of “late modernist” or “mid-century” poetry, and thereby drawing forward the more pertinent issue of a poetry that faces up to its own self-critical and rhetorical inflections. It seems to me that the more criticism cleaves to formalist readings that account for these poets’ revisionary rhetorical strategies, the better our chance of articulating how twentieth-century poetry developed methods of responding to the historical pressures that shaped it. In my judgment, the renewal of rhetoric in late modern poetry prefigures in a striking way the semiological undecidability attributed to it by Paul de Man. In Allegories of Reading, de Man claims that, “Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration,” and furthermore he “equates[es] the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself.” Although de Man’s conception of rhetoric has often been used to forward claims about the ultimately negative or nihilistic consequences of epistemological uncertainty, it has also been largely instrumental in supporting the conception of yet another critical turn, from the rhetorical (that is the literary) to the ethical. As J. Hillis Miller asserts in The Ethics of Reading, attending to the uncertainties of a text and the demands it places upon us (its ought), while also freely responding to the text as discrete individuals, constitutes an ethical act.

This formula for restoring to criticism a necessarily ethical dimension has proven perhaps most influential in the disagreements it has fostered. As Miller has it, the demand placed upon us in reading a text requires that we remain attentive to its indeterminate pluralities of meaning and not succumb to “the making of value judgments [or] the
uttering of ethical commands,” which in every case are always, on the level of the epistemological “law” of the text, “baseless…always unjust and unjustified” (48, 55). This stands in stark contrast to the ethics of reading proposed by Martha Nussbaum and Wayne C. Booth, for whom the text provides an occasion to hone our moral attitudes and reach a consensus regarding right action. Yet, as I interpret it, Miller’s view does not condone absconding ethical decision making—on the contrary, he continually stresses the imperative of such judgments—but, rather, embracing rhetorical indeterminacy for its subversive and potentially revolutionary ability to illustrate the fictional foundation of all moral codes and civil orders. If Miller fails to give a sufficient account for agency outside of the “cage of language,” others have revised his reading to suggest that “ethics is…best conceived as a factor of ‘imperativity’ immanent in, but not confined to, the practices of language, analysis, narrative, and creation”; not as a distinct discourse of its own, but a shifting “principle of commonality between practices and discourse,” as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued, ethics may provide the lens through which we can bring language and the world of action together. Likewise, Ewa Płonowska Ziarek urges us to consider how the conjunction of the rhetorical and ethical turns helps us to “interpret the so-called crisis of modernism” more positively “than as the unfortunate predicament of self-reflexive art” and “the atrophy of aestheticism, evident in more and more extreme declarations of the autonomous status of art.” In all these and similar critical endeavors, there is a consistent attempt to reclaim the rhetorical as a literary principle that facilitates modes of reflective and deliberative thought, and by tracing this conjuncture in late modernist literature we can suggest that the efforts of these poets to reimagine rhetoric is simultaneously the attempt to reimagine ethical and political motivations.
A particularly promising strain in the ethical turn of literary criticism stems from the ethical discourse put forth by Emmanuel Levinas, whose challenging revision to Western philosophy’s concepts of ethics and the relation between the self and other seeks nothing short of the radical decentering of philosophy itself to reveal ethics as the primary condition of all manners of being and thinking. For a growing number of critics, Levinas “seem[s] the perfect abettor of the ethical turn away from both poststructuralism and Marxism” and their impasses in the realm of literary studies, especially since his philosophy allows us to enact a critical revision of ethicity itself as well as to move beyond self-enclosed representations of language to consider the fundamental relation with others behind all communication. In its synthetic capabilities, writes Robert Eaglestone, Levinas’s ethics proves so promising for criticism not because it offers a particular “methodology or type of literary theory”—indeed Levinas is quite resistant to literary appropriation (of which, more later)—“but rather a justification of a variety of approaches to literature” (7). Throughout each chapter of this project, I employ a Levinasian framework for understanding “ethics” as it is revealed through the rhetorical evocations of the late modernist poetry I analyze. While I do employ a consistent methodology for my formalist readings of the poems in each chapter, I try to keep my discussion of ethics less predetermined and relative to the revisionary rhetorical practices of each poet. Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop, in sharing the experience of a modernist rhetorical crisis, I have suggested, all share in a project to reimagine poetry’s ethical potential. Each poet’s works necessarily arise from different formal, moral, and political motivations, but their imaginative interrogation of or performances of a “critical ethics” can all be productively illuminated within a Levinasian framework. At the heart
of “Ethics as First Philosophy” (1984), Levinas proclaims, “Language is born in responsibility,” a genealogy that goes to the core of what it means to be a human individual, for as language gives one the ability “to say I, to be in the first person,” one is also thereby drawn into question, “but also to questioning,” by the other that language necessarily supposes prior to any answer (82). Because of the imperative command the other has over me and because of my fear that through my existing unjust violence might befall her, Levinas continues, I am always obligated to respond as myself through a relinquishing of my sovereign self-enclosure and to be open to the other’s approach: “One has to respond to one’s right to be, not by referring to some abstract or anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one’s fear for the Other” (EFP 82). As I understand it, the ethics called for here bears two interconnected meanings. First, that one cannot imagine a language of any kind without first presupposing the existence of a relationship with others to receive that language. Despite modernist poetry’s, and particularly the lyric’s, claims to radical autonomy, it can never presume to occupy its position without first answering to the demands of others. “Ethics,” therefore, assumes a radical priority for communication, or what Levinas often calls “discourse,” which in being always oriented toward others is, in an odd sense, excommunication, or language opened to critical reappraisal. Second, that by having no reference to “anonymous law” or “judicial entity,” ethics is always more and less than obligation as we typically understand it. In this sense, R. Clifton Spargo opposes morality, or “the conventions, regulations, or parameters of knowledge that determine behavior,” to ethics, which he “refer[s] to more basic structures of relationship as well as to the critique that motivates and conditions ‘all’ moral knowledge” (EM 8). In this, ethics retains a double critical potential: to
preserve a radical priority to all knowledge-driven behavior and to deploy the critique that will in turn draw those behaviors into question and hold them up for revision.

Before I delineate the ekphrastic crux around which my rhetorical and ethical interventions will turn, I should also situate my project in relation to other works that have explored the intersection of ethics and lyric. Throughout the chapters I engage the works of numerous critics writing on each of these poets, but few of them have yet attempted to pursue a theory of lyric on ethical premises. I have already noted my study’s relative proximity to the approaches taken toward twentieth-century poetry by Altieri and Blasing, who both insist upon the centrality of rhetoric in the development of the late modernist lyric, but move on from there to rethink the poets’ political or psychological preoccupations instead of their “ethical” motivations. Other theorists of lyric I have occasion to draw upon throughout my study tend to take a much longer or transhistoricist view. In The Logic of Literature, Käte Hamburger makes the surprising argument that of all non-scientific, literary discourses, lyric alone is nonfictional because “[w]e experience it as the statement of a statement-subject” (234). This does not mean, however, that the lyric is merely a subjective literary genre, but that it is a mode of language that expresses its subjectivity within the method of its expression, its objectivity. Hamburger’s exposition reads like a reiteration of the high aesthetic ideal that form is content, but with the crucial difference that “the lyric I, can be encountered only as a real and never as a fictive subject” (278). Paul H. Fry, who argues in A Defense of Poetry that poetry (in its broadest sense) seeks not meaning but “ostension,” or the presentational immediacy that “releases consciousness from its dependence on the signifying process” (4), discerns in Hamburger’s definition of lyric a close affinity with T. W. Adorno’s dialectical
reappraisal of lyric as ascending, despite its subjective provenance, “to the realm of the
general by virtue of its bringing to light things undistorted, ungrasped, things not yet
subsumed” (qtd in Fry 17-18). In both of these appraisals, lyric occupies a unique place
of immediacy from which it would seem able to stage an ethical intervention in the actual
world precisely because the lyric’s autonomy is founded on its communicative potential.
Additionally, W. R. Johnson despairs that modern theory has reduced the concept of lyric
to the definition put forward by T. S. Eliot in “The Three Voices of Poetry” that the poet
in “meditative verse” speaks “his own thoughts and sentiments to himself or to no one”
(1-2). In The Idea of Lyric, Johnson argues that the history of lyric, both ancient and
modern, is subject to considerable rhetorical variation for which Eliot does not account.
To the degree that the modern lyric approximates the mode of the ancient choral, he
further avers, it has the potential “to reestablish the great metaphors of communitas as the
proper and central metaphors for the human condition” (Johnson 178). The choral
likewise seeks an immediacy of communication in that it brings together “the agent and
object of choral mimesis” (community representative and community) even if,
paradoxically, that community has ceased to or has yet to exist: “What choral poets do is
not so much to state the fact of good community as to imagine the possibility of good
community” (Johnson 178, 182). At various times in my chapters I employ these theories
to underscore how these poets through rhetorical experimentations try to imagine an
immediate speech with otherness as a possibility of ethical communication even as they
remain suspicious of the persuasive figural representations of community they employ.

In turning my attention from more generalized rhetorical equivocations of ethics
in lyric to the particular strategies associated with ekphrasis, however, I am deeply
influenced by the sustained theories of elegiac lyric performed by Jahan Ramazani and R. Clifton Spargo. My indebtedness to their work has less to do with the particular thematic prominence they attribute to mourning in modern literature—although I do read a number of poems that display a particularly mournful cast—than with the manner in which they analyze elegy, a lyrical subset, as a metonymic representation of the whole of modern lyrical preoccupations with the role poetry might serve for the culture in which it is produced. Ekphrasis, as the poetic genre of representation reflecting on representation itself, which therefore serves a critical meta-functionality for the modernist aesthetics of autonomy, sits comfortably in this analogical framework. In *Poetry of Mourning*, Ramazani considers that the elegy “is central to the history and development of twentieth-century lyric,” not opposed to modern poetry, as some have thought, but “inextricable” from it (x, 1). Significantly, he discerns elegy’s central role to lie in its capacity to foster social critique by “question[ing] the ethical grounds of recuperative art” and to issue “negative responses to dominant public norms” (8, 14). In *The Ethics of Mourning*, Spargo suggests that “to represent a crisis in the norms of mourning entails a concern for the inadequate praxis of the moment…but also for an injustice that inheres in every situation of mourning” (4). Crucially, he identifies in mourning a central ethical role of challenging the “recollective” character of “familiar moral philosophical models,” which by figuring one’s ethical obligation after the fact typically serves to limit and constrain the degree to which one can act responsibly toward others (*EM* 14-15).

Furthermore, both Ramazani and Spargo stress the functional role of a resistant strain in the elegiac genre, or anti-elegy, which serves an equally crucial dialectical role in the genre’s development. For Ramazani, anti-elegy ultimately serves to increase the efficacy
of modern elegy in its potential for social protest, but also in its function as “compromise-formation” in the restorative work of mourning (15). Spargo theorizes the melancholic elegy or anti-elegy, however, as enacting an ethical resistance to the closure of mourning to the extent that it pursues an impossible protection of the dead other and always sets before itself a task of responsibility at which it cannot but fail (Em 13). Ultimately, Spargo’s reading of elegiac lyric performs the most trenchant ethical reading for how to discern even in poetry’s failures the achievement of a peculiarly Levinasian ethical import, and I draw upon his dialectic to help formulate my own reading of the late modernist ekphrastic tradition. But both works eminently demonstrate how lyric can be turned to the task of critically intervening in societal deliberations and, perhaps more importantly, how the world can turn back to lyric poetry for meaningful insight into how it negotiates its own representations of ethical and political action.

Turning now from these precedents, I submit my thesis: what is most surprising of the poets I consider is that their rhetorical experimentation should consistently reclaim ekphrasis, a mode typically considered emblematic of the solipsistic modernist lyric, as a rhetorical strategy for staging the encounter between a text and that which is other to it both culturally and semiotically. By appropriating this strategy and taking it beyond its ordinary high aesthetic focus, these poets commit themselves to rethinking community as open to cultural differences and informed by constant self-critical interrogation. Rather than simply being a genre associated with modernist aesthetic autonomy, I argue, ekphrastic rhetoric helps poets mediate political, historical, and cultural differences precisely when poetic art makes its self-inquisitive turn; that is, ekphrasis is not merely a self-referential articulation of autonomy, but a means of exploring the construction of the
autonomous as a crossing into and with otherness. While ekphrasis is only one of many rhetorical practices employed by the poets I consider, my claim is that its prevalence in each poet’s work renders it a sign of the turn to responsible rhetoric in late modernist American poetry as a whole. Ekphrasis in the work of all these poets, therefore, offers critical insight into what Peter Bürger calls the “institution of art.” He reminds us that “works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works” (Bürger 12). When one turns to a consideration of a particular work, such as an ekphrasis, one speaks of its significance “figuratively” according to the institutionally framed “manner which regulates the commerce with works of this kind in a given society” (Bürger 12). This figurative role takes on a critical performativity in the case of ekphrasis, however, precisely because it stages the encounter with otherness that allows for the disruption and revision of these institutional frameworks.

The most prominent theories of ekphrasis have for the most part treated it as a generic poetic form, “the verbal representation of a visual representation” or, more exclusively, a poem about an artwork. As such, ekphrasis has become associated with the formal autonomy embodied primarily by lyrical poetry in the Western tradition, which is at the same time inextricable from the rise of modern museum and visual culture. Although recent reappraisals of ekphrasis have constructively differentiated between this narrow formal definition created in large part by twentieth-century artists and critics and the broader classical connotations of ekphrasis as a rhetorical mode of description, my claim is that it is in the context of the highly institutionalized understanding of ekphrasis that a critical rhetorical analysis of its late modernist
appropriations must begin. The genre, as formulated by twentieth-century critics, is usually said to have begun with Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*. This particular example encapsulates the fascination that the genre has held over twentieth-century readers as both “a minor poetic genre and universal principle of poetics” (Mitchell 699). Homer’s ekphrasis is merely a digressive and ornamental passage. The larger work in no way depends upon it for structural integrity and so it reads in large part as a completely useless and detachable piece of poetry. But, then again, the shield could also be read as a symbolic representation of the whole, a lyric reduction of the epic. Apprehending the *mise en abymic* quality of ekphrasis, critics of the twentieth-century have returned repeatedly to the genre, expanding its significance, as does Murray Krieger, to “a general principle of poetics” and poetic autonomy, “asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity.” Whether the poetic description of an art object was ever considered a distinct genre prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries matters less, however, than the tradition of aesthetic criticism through which ekphrasis has been conceived. This critical tradition has two distinct trajectories, both with classical origins and both institutionalized during the Renaissance. The *ut pictura poesis* or “Sister Arts” tradition theorizes the fundamental similarity and harmonious coexistence of the verbal and visual arts, whereas the tradition of the *paragone* stresses artistic differences and the productive rivalry between painting and poetry. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued regarding these traditions, “The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of the warp and woof. The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs” (*Iconology* 43).
What this suggests is that ekphrasis is not merely a humbly descriptive genre, but the poetic practice that allows us to examine the relation of word and image and the ideological “interests and powers it serves” (*Iconology* 44).

To varying degrees, poets like Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop participate in this received tradition, frequently writing poems about art; however, they do not write ekphrases as lyric set pieces reiterating narrow conceptions of the lyric’s generic, formal autonomy. Instead, their ekphrastic strategies push beyond prescribed “topo[i], occasion[s], or metaphor[s],” to approximate what Bonnie Costello calls “a genre in the broadest sense—an attitude and meaning which find expression in a particular set of representational strategies.” The attitude and meaning these poets ascribe to the representational strategies of lyric ekphrasis, I contend, are incontrovertibly ethical in so far as they rehearse the fundamental encounter with otherness. In broad terms, the ekphrastic praxis of these poets conforms to the rhetorical understanding of ekphrasis promoted by Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux. “Although ekphrasis has had certain forms associated with it,” she writes, “it is not itself a form, but a rhetorical situation and a set of practices and tropes that offer non-prescriptive possibilities for exploring that situation” (Loizeaux 10). But the rhetorical situation that perpetually structures ekphrasis—the encounter between one art and another—moves it beyond attempts “to imitate the image or the still presence of the work of art,” in its traditional connotations; instead, ekphrasis “negotiates a relation to that other…[and] returns to the act of communication inherent in its Greek roots: *ek* and *phraztein*, to speak out,” thereby moving beyond the representational domain of self-referential autonomy (Loizeaux 17).
Mitchell’s crucial insight that, in staging the encounter of poetic texts with their “semiotic ‘Others,’” ekphrasis always expresses “sublimated versions of our ambivalence about social others…which, like ideology itself, must be worked through” (699, 702-03). Ekphrasis necessarily begins in indifference, Mitchell claims, but in working through this rhetorical indeterminacy late modernist poets such as Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop are able to redirect ekphrasis toward an imaginative realization of non-indifference.

Although ekphrasis, as a poetic text taking representation as its subject, purports to be about the process of representation itself, there is an overwhelming sense in which late modernist rhetorical appropriations of this textual practice foreground not the accomplished power of poetic representation, but the impossibility of representation. At this point, my thesis regarding the relative uses of ekphrasis for representing imaginative ethical and political motivations runs against its counterthesis, which I also attempt to illuminate throughout this project even as I am reluctant to hold it up as a consistent principle. Very much in the same way that elegy becomes anti-elegiac, as Spargo and Ramazani observe, the function of this redirection of ekphrasis away from representational guarantees of high aesthetic autonomy results in self-denying or sacrificial poetic strategies that are more appropriately understood as iconoclastic or anti-ekphrastic in intention. Rather than simply negating or neutralizing the ekphrastic encounter in insurmountable indeterminacy, the anti-representational strain of rhetoric is quite in keeping with the revisionary ethics promulgated by many late-twentieth century philosophers, especially Levinas and Derrida. They stress the incommensurable nature of the ethical relation and the radical exteriority of the demand placed upon the self by the other, which cannot be subsumed to a totalized representation or diminished by culturally
prescribed principles of personal moral obligation. Under the ethical demands placed upon the poetic text by its others, ekphrasis experiences a deficit of representational imagination, which can only be mediated, in somewhat Derridean language, by a surfeit of rhetorical responsibility. In this sense, this counterthesis is not altogether unlike Mitchell’s thesis in *Iconology* that the study of images that retains a certain iconoclastic resistance to the ideology of the image, the iconology practiced by “a blind listener” who attends to discourse about images and not the images themselves, “might see patterns…invisible to the sighted” (1). For Mitchell, ekphrasis always relies heavily on the *paragonal* tradition, an antagonistic relationship which is expressed through two simultaneously operative yet ambivalent rhetorical modes of “hope” and “fear” (696-97).

Whereas some critics working toward a rhetorical theory of ekphrasis worry that Mitchell’s paragonal model limits our potential to locate the many other motivations driving ekphrasis beside antagonism and the striving for dominance, I argue that it increases the acumen of our perception of the ethical motivations of rhetoric. Furthermore, the notion of the paragonal relationship between the arts seems to occupy a position of critical prominence in the late modern period made especially clear to us by the many revivals and reappraisals of the Enlightenment thought of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose *Laocoön* (1766) continued to loom large for many mid-century writers, artists, and critics. For late modernist practitioners of ekphrasis who submit it to an ethical rigor and who remain self-critical of their own methods of representation, the paragonal relation aids in ensuring that the other remain irreducible to totalized representations even as it also provides the motive for staging the rhetorical event of an encounter with those who are culturally and politically other.
Therefore, throughout my analyses of the performative ekphrases of Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop, I consider how these poems are not primarily about how to represent others, but about how they employ a critical rhetoric to imagine a communicative discourse with others. To emphasize this rhetorical approach my chapters mostly follow a four-fold methodology: 1) I consider each poet’s cultural situation and explain how the need to discover or enhance a rhetorical poetics becomes inseparable from ethical motivations; 2) I trace how each is led to meditating upon inter-artistic relations or ekphrastic rhetoric as a means of realizing these obligations; 3) I read each poet’s traditional ekphrases (i.e., poem’s about paintings, sculptures, artworks) to demonstrate their ethical motivations; and 4) I then read poems central to each poet’s work that we might not typically consider ekphrastic in order to illustrate how the deployment of the strategies of ekphrasis in other contexts coincides with the poets’ attempts to address questions pertaining to ethics.

As suggested earlier, I lean heavily in my analysis on the ethical discourse developed by the late-twentieth-century philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to draw out the significance of these poets’ experimentation with ekphrastic rhetorical strategies and to suggest how their ethical concerns both prefigure and serve as an aesthetic counterpart to ideas later developed by these philosophers. In particular, I draw heavily on Levinas’s central ideas of “the Saying and the Said,” “the relation of the-one-to-the-other,” and “substitution,” as explicated in his major work *Otherwise than Being*, to embody the kinds of rhetorically imagined ethics I perceive these poets to have been seeking in their response to mid-century world crises. In choosing to rely on his conceptual ethics, my project incurs the challenge that arises from Levinas’s relentless
suspicion of literature, representation, and rhetoric. For Levinas, ethical responsibility occupies a radical position of anteriority (an-arche) to all other commitments and motivations, and he often dismisses literature, and particularly rhetoric—which for him signifies approaching the other “obliquely,” “with an agenda,” or with “ruse, emprise, and exploitation” and not the straightforwardness of the face-to-face—as irresponsible. Although, according to Jill Robbins, Levinas’s appraisals of literature display certain inconsistencies and seemed to have undergone certain revisions throughout his life, his typical dismissal of literature problematically conforms to the traditions of the Platonic and Rabbinic proscription on imitation and idolatry. I have attempted to deflect this unwillingness to engage with the ethics of literature in a number of ways throughout my project. First, I have cited Levinas’s own antifigural rhetorical involutions as a means of justifying how literature, like philosophy, can be turned away from its own supposed first-order priorities (e.g., imitation, beauty, and pleasure) to sustain a discourse that is ethical in intention. Second, following Spargo, I have attempted to remain attentive to the signifying import of impossibility for responsibility in ethics. Spargo makes the astute reading about the nature of responsibility in the condition of extremity called for by Emmanuel Levinas, that “in no way does the perception of responsibility’s extraordinary, even its impossible, connotations lessen the requirement for action. Rather, the specter of failure, the incapability of agency, inspires the future action” (EM 37). At various points in my chapters, therefore, I note particular works or developments in these poets’ careers which necessarily function as failures in meeting the “infinite” demands of responsibility, but thereby also successfully reorient poetry with social motivations in their commitment to justice.
Furthermore, to demonstrate these poets’ efforts to redirect their energies toward a vital concern for the cultural others excluded from modernist discourse, I practice a doubled method of reading the poems similar to what Simon Critchley has called Derrida’s *clôtural* reading. This two-staged reading process first articulates a text’s philosophical assumptions and identifies its methods for reaching a totalized closure, and then dearticulates these assumptions to render the text decentered and exposed to otherness. As I read Critchley’s argument in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, deconstruction as a reading practice cannot be sufficiently understood without an ethical intervention by way of the philosophy of Levinas. Conversely, I would suggest that the full social significance of Levinas’s philosophy outside of the obsessive qualities of the infinite ethical demand cannot be realized without a readerly supplementation of Derridean deconstructive principles. Derrida’s works are, therefore, employed strategically, though less centrally, at various times throughout my project to facilitate this supplementation. Specifically, I have occasion to cite his thought on the economy of sacrificial violence in “Violence and Metaphysics” (1964) and *The Gift of Death* (1993), as well as his explications of the logic of *differance* and *supplementarity* in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and his less appreciated reflections on the visual arts in *The Truth in Painting* (1978).

My study begins with Stevens and Auden, whose turn to rhetoric teaches us that there is a need to outline an alternative paradigm for understanding modernist poetry in its later phases, especially as the violent realities of World War II render modernism’s aesthetic legacy increasingly suspect. In the first chapter, I challenge familiar critiques that Stevens is escapist and explore how his consistent figuration of the imagination and
reality as the interplay between the arts propounds the Paterian idea of *anders-streben*, or the ‘striving toward or struggle with otherness.’ In a reading of “Owl’s Clover” (1936), I demonstrate Stevens’ adoption of a self-critical rhetoric that challenges totalizing representations through the continual sculpting, de-sculpting, and re-sculpting of statuesque, imaginative figures. The recurrence of this strategy in later poems exemplifies Stevens’ critical attitude toward both monumental formal aesthetics and monumental politics, but it also serves as a powerful corrective to Levinas’ dismissal of the ethical power of literature in “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948) by demonstrating how rhetorical inflections can move poetic imagination beyond the reified image in order to sustain figural relations with otherness.

While Stevens clarified the need for poetry to distance itself from monumental politics in order to realize its ethical potential, Auden’s “American” poetry demonstrates how political identifications are always necessarily subject to ethical judgment, a move that productively mirrors the central transition from the ethical relation of substitution to the political relation of justice in Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being*. Against Jarrell’s familiar indictment that Auden’s mid-career changes in style and attitude were mechanistic and self-servingly moralistic, I read several poems from the turbulent volume *Another Time* (1940) to show how Auden revises his poetic strategies in searching for a communal rhetoric that does not begin from presupposed ideas of national or partisan belonging but from a concern for the plight of others. In this section, I offer my reappraisal of *ek-phasis* as the rhetorical production of “a speaking outside of speech,” akin to the presence of the ethical Saying within the philosophical Said theorized by Levinas. These poems consistently transfer rhetorical energies away from strictly
representative aims toward the evocation of an ethical community. I then turn my attention to a critical survey of suffering in the historical poems “Spain,” “Memorial to the City,” “Horae Canonicae,” and “Homage to Clio,” in which Auden offers a reevaluation of the sacrificial logic underlying historical narratives in order to reverse the modern political tendency toward erasing the victim. In this, he adopts something like Levinas’ concept of substitution in place of the violent sacrificial narratives upon which cultural history is often cemented.

In the last two chapters, I consider how under the influence of Stevens and Auden poets of the middle generation turned primarily to the rhetorical mode of ekphrasis in their pursuit of a poetic speech that might accommodate otherness. Jarrell turns to ekphrasis extensively as a means of articulating the ethical failures he perceives in modernist culture. Rooted squarely in the iconoclastic tradition of Lessing’s *Laocoön*, Jarrell’s ekphrastic poems, such as “The Knight, Death, and the Devil,” “The Bronze David of Donatello,” “In Galleries,” and “The Old and the New Masters,” usually exploit traditional oppositions between the verbal and visual arts to expose the culturally suspect logics behind modernist aesthetic prescriptions. This strategy allows him to enact several reversals of identification in his poems, which urge readers to consider those regularly excluded from modernist discourse as well as promote a poetics that fosters critical disagreement and challenges the reigning economies of cultural value that make such exclusion possible. Furthermore, I argue that the ethical iconoclasm developed in his ekphrases also supports the central structural motivations for his problematic monologues, of which I take “A Girl in a Library,” “Lady Bates,” and “Burning the Letters” as representative examples. These poems explode the conventions of the
drastic monologue in order not to speak for and thereby ensure the silence of others (war victims, children, women, African Americans, and others who for Jarrell are always disenfranchised), but to establish on their behalf a persuasive appeal to the reader for cultural recognition and exchange.

Although Bishop only occasionally indulges in poems about artworks, most of her poetry focuses intensely on contrasting rhetorical frames and perspectives and attempts to mediate them by way of a poetics of description. Starting the last chapter on this premise, I consider a number of poems from Bishop’s first collection *North & South* (1946) to examine how from an early stage in her career Bishop turned her efforts to creating a rhetorical poetics and how this led her tentatively to engage with and revise the ekphrastic tradition. In her major ekphrastic poems, “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem,” Bishop reflects on this method as art’s capacity to foster the co-incidence of “views” and imagine a world equally shared by its inhabitants. Though Bishop avoids obvious or self-evidently political references in her poetry, I argue that her poetics are immanently political because they offer a practical method of questioning the world from a personal vantage point while approximating a shared experience, which moves readers from the detachment of indifference toward others to an ethically informed political position of non-indifference. I conclude with a reading of the seminal poem “Brazil, January 1, 1502” to demonstrate how Bishop employs ekphrastic strategies for ethical and political ends by turning our gaze to a critical reflection on the cultural attitudes implicit in the historical legacy of Western colonialism and the categories of gender, religion, race, and sexuality.
In grouping these poets all together in their late modernist moments I seek to demonstrate a shared poetic response to the social and political realities of the mid-twentieth century that necessitated the developments of a more responsible poetical rhetoric and the ethical reorientation of literary community. The roughly chronological presentation of the chapters to follow projects a tentative narrative of influence, conflict, and development that, while it attempts to account for the disparities and commonalities of each poet’s work, attests to an ongoing conversation and deliberation about the role formalist poetry might play at or beyond the historical limit of modernism. Each poet faces these challenges from his own peculiar technical, formal vantage or tends to draw divergent significances from her own cultural and historical position. The poetics espoused by each is certainly rhetorical in different measures and, likewise, each places different emphases on what ethics is meant to signify in the poetic context. But seen together, Stevens, Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop all bring to focus the prevalent late modernist, mid-century desire to imagine a poetic speech capable of beckoning the approach of another more just world.
“ADD THIS TO RHETORIC. IT IS TO ADD”: WALLACE STEVENS AND THE FIGURATIONS OF THE STATUE

In an address given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, entitled “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” Wallace Stevens reflected on one of his favorite subjects, namely, the endless struggle between reality and the imagination. At this late moment in his career, the analogy Stevens invoked for this process was that of the relation between the arts. “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us,” he said, once again illustrating the complementarity of reality and the imagination. “There is the same interchange between these two worlds that there is between one art and another, migratory passings to and fro, quickenings, Promethean liberations and discoveries.” Stevens’ chosen analogy is significant in part because it justifies the view, from which so many of our critical excursions typically start, that Stevens’ poetry is both integral to our understanding of poetic modernism and at least partially opposed to its own institutionalization. Founded as it is on “Promethean” transgression, his poetry stages problematic crossings that attest to his acute ambivalence toward the principles of aesthetic autonomy he himself helped formulate in the earlier stages of American modernism. Perhaps the most central of these crossings is that between the conflicting personal and social obligations that achieves prominence in his poetry of the middle-1930s and continues to hold his imagination for the remainder of his career. What began in Stevens’ early career, so Frank Lentricchia has argued, as an individual aesthetic quest for “a radical deviancy of experience that only literature in its most committed avant-garde form can provide,” eventually took on the form of a historicism that “tend[ed] to wander unhappily between criticism and utopia” (143, 156).
Such a judgment seems warranted by the language Stevens himself creates for us in his poetry and prose, as revolving on the principal axes of reality and the imagination, and interprets much of his critical and poetic legacy.

But are we too eager to affirm this now somewhat canonical judgment, given the ambivalence with which Stevens himself espoused it? Edward Ragg questions the value of reading Stevens’ poetry with such a self-enclosed and unified vocabulary:

Rather than learn Stevens’ language, we need to contextualize how and why the poet developed the vocabulary he did and why he came to have no further use for this personal idiom in the last decade of his career. In addition, scholars need to be wary of the extent to which “Stevensian”—if I can call it that—can inform the kind of self-confirming, rather than merely self-consistent, criticism that secondary literature on Stevens all too often displays. (98)

As this argument goes, much of the debate surrounding Wallace Stevens’ political engagement results in a severe reduction of the poetry’s significance, notably to either a problematic argument for a “poetics of resistance” or the equally unfair charge of escapism and complicity with violence.34 I don’t think we have to share in Ragg’s antipathy toward current political readings of Stevens that valorize a “poetics of resistance” to acknowledge the need to pay greater attention to the rhetorical motivations underlying the poetry. Indeed, I contend that Stevens’ rhetoric is perhaps the greatest index of his developing engagement with mid-twentieth century political realities precisely because it is so self-reflexive and critical of its own operation. Whereas modernist poetics often sought to extinguish personality and to efface any evidence of the working of its medium in order to claim a naive realism of “the thing itself,” Stevens’ poetry stubbornly resists such attempts to affirm its own autonomy. I think this is what Stevens had in mind when he called the imagination the “irrepressible revolutionist” that
does not rest content with “the chief image” (NA 152). For Stevens, the imagination does not resist the “image” nor, by extension, rhetoric. The image is instead the sign of the imagination at work; and in poetry, this sign is given form through the force of rhetoric. What the imagination actively resists, then, is the temptation to secure the image against the work of imagination. We cannot forego the signifying potential of the rhetorical imagination, therefore, in favor of a fixed knowledge of the idea or image.

What Stevens’ use of rhetoric emphasizes is the need to outline an alternate paradigm for understanding modernist poetry in its later phases, during the period when poetry became suspicious of its aesthetic legacy and attempted to relate to a world fundamentally changed by World War II. A promising approach adopted by a number of recent critics is to move beyond the interminable epistemological concerns we confront in Stevens’ poetry for a consideration of the ethical. As Angus J. Cleghorn avers, “Stevens consistently explores how we know things, but this concern is not limited to epistemology; it always moves toward ethical implications” (13). Bold statements like this might seem unwarranted in reference to a poet who famously claimed that the poet has no social obligation (NA 27), but not if we shift some of our expectations about ethics. Ethics in Stevens’ poetry is very much opposed to moral prescriptivism and participates instead in the imaginative power to transform rather than rigidify social practices. Writing about pain and history in Stevens’ poetry, Milton J. Bates argues “that Stevens was far less interested in the politics of history than he was in its moral possibilities,” and his “interest reflects, in turn, an ‘open’ or non-determinist sense of history” (Stevens’ Soldier Poems 204). Politics, as a category—or more importantly as a discourse in mid-century America—had the tendency to fall prey to closed forms of
interpretation or determinist narratives, so it is not inconceivable that poets felt the category of ethics (understood as the pre-political) more amenable to their needs. Furthermore, in keeping with this logic, one would not turn to such non-determinist ethics if one desired consolation for pain; however, one would find this poetic practice of ethics more accommodating if facing a social context that had so abused the typical “economy of suffering and consolation” as to render any available response “self-indulgent, derivative, or even dishonest” (Bates 179-80). It seems fair to say, then, in keeping with the chronology of this dissertation, that Wallace Stevens was perhaps the first generation American modernist poet most attentive to the ethical burden poetry faced in the generations leading up to and following World War II and also the one most capable of demonstrating for others how the ethical could be engaged through a return to rhetoric.

But I’ve begun this chapter with reference to “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” not only to demonstrate the development of a uniquely Stevensian language in the criticism and poetry, but also to underscore a thematic concern that serves in my judgment as a unique frame for Stevens’ rhetorical practices, specifically, the intersecting and intermediating relation of the verbal and visual arts. Through the course of these chapters I will be making not only the larger order claim that the mid-twentieth century poets I discuss renewed their investments in a critically rhetorical poetry so as to resuscitate and expand what might be considered the ethical provenance of the lyric, but also the pointed claim that these poets shared a particular rhetorical technique for achieving this, which is to say, the praxis of ekphrasis. Much like “ethics,” “ekphrasis” must also be understood in this context to exceed normative views of the term. As I think
will be made abundantly clear in this chapter, the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis does not require the coincidence of the genre we typically associate with this term: the poem that describes an artwork or, more generally, “the verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 3). Later I consider poetic interventions in this genre in chapters on W. H. Auden and Randall Jarrell, but throughout this dissertation I attempt to avoid an easy conflation of the rhetoric of ekphrasis with the ekphrastic genre, keeping my critical focus on the potential for ekphrastic rhetoric to serve as a means of articulating ethical values. Framed rhetorically in this way, Stevens’ analogy between the relation of the imagination and reality and the relation of the arts takes on a deeper and truly ethical significance.

1.

When Stevens characterized the relations between the arts in his 1951 address as comprised of “migratory passings to and fro, quickenings, Promethean liberations and discoveries” (NA 169), the most immediate influence was probably Walter Pater, whose work Stevens knew well, and whose concept of **Anders-streben** is revisited in the passage cited above. In *The Renaissance* (1877/93), Pater argues against one of the central tenets of G. E. Lessing’s influential treatise *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), which had proposed that each of the arts had its own unique provenance and tended to be effective to the degree that it remained within its designated boundaries. According to Lessing’s aesthetic thesis, painting (i.e., the visual arts) and poetry (i.e., literature) properly belonged to the respective domains of space and time. Pater demurs from such rigid segregation and claims that “in its special mode of handling
its given material each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an *Anders-streben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, by which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces” (Pater 105). According to Pater’s aesthetics, the arts are free to derive vitality and inspiration from one another, and any strictly policed notions of which of them get to handle space or time cannot hold. Moreover, the extent to which any art abstains from open exchange with other mediums might determine its rate of decline.

Pater’s depiction of inter-artistic relations obviously draws freely from the theory of his subjects—the artists, painters, and writers of the European Renaissance who were primarily responsible for conceiving the sister arts tradition and institutionalizing the Horatian edict, *ut pictura poesis*, against whose excesses Lessing was supposedly reacting. But such influence does not imply a simple return to a Renaissance aesthetic. “[A]ll true aesthetic criticism,” Pater proclaims, begins in the realization “that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other” and preserving the “special responsibilities [of any art] to its material” is a critic’s irremissible duty (102). Pater thus importantly retains from Lessing’s neoclassical stricture a reverence for difference in the arts, the trace of which can be seen in his synthetic concept, *Anders-streben*. Literally, “Anders-streben” translates as “striving after otherness;” however, with the odd mix of registers he uses to describe the term (e.g., the conciliatory concepts “able,” “reciprocally,” and “to lend,” contrasted with the violence of “alienation,” “limitations,” and “forces”), Pater underscores its ambiguity, which turns on contrasting attitudes toward otherness: “other-
seeking/striving” and “striving with the other.” This ambivalence toward the other is perhaps best understood as the play of difference that allows the arts to function. Difference serves as both the motivation for any art “to pass into the condition of some other art” and the regulation that forbids the arts from fully occupying “the place of each other.” Anders-streben is, therefore, the attempt to explain the proliferation of the arts during the Renaissance, when the limitations of various arts forms were undergoing a process of negotiation, when the boundaries between the art forms became decidedly more fluid than in the previous centuries. The term also preserves art’s critical capacity by acknowledging a “paragonal” version of this negotiation and exchange between the visual arts and poetry that models rhetorical practices more broadly conceived.

Indicative of any aesthetic argument, Pater’s synthesis of the arts is a highly figural attempt to reckon with difference and this is primarily why Stevens finds it so attractive. As W. J. T. Mitchell has clarified, any argument that maintains the illusory distinction between visual and verbal signs must inevitably resort to an elaborate figuration of Leonardo’s paragone, “a ‘war of signs’ […] in which the stakes are things like nature, truth, reality and the human spirit” (Iconology 47). We no longer consider the literal distinction between the “arbitrary sign” of poetry and the “natural sign” of painting theoretically tenable because the difference has been de-essentialized and all signs are recognized as “arbitrary” and therefore conventional. Nevertheless, by conventional understanding, this distinction still serves as a motivating logic in our ideologies and cultural practices of the arts and must be understood to subtend the imaginative achievements of poets, what Stevens famously called the “supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [life]” (NA 31). As Stevens became increasingly
occupied with questions of “nature, truth, reality, and the human spirit” throughout his career, this preoccupation often took the form of attempting to resist the pressure of the growing cultural “feel[ing] that the [end of civilization] is not merely possible but measurably probable” (OP 229), and so it is not surprising that he would turn to aesthetic arguments with such high cultural stakes.

What for Pater may have been a necessary corrective in the development of aesthetic criticism, for Stevens is a “Promethean” struggle for human imaginative autonomy while resisting the contingent cultural crises that certain unconstrained cultural “quickenings” and “liberations” render imminent. Furthermore, if Stevens’ poetic concerns finally lead him to the question of ekphrasis, the rhetorical space whose true domain is not a domain at all but a liminal dimension between artistic discourses, this has to do with its constitutive capacity to figure, by means of the encounter between an artistic text and its semiotic “Other,” the ethical relation to the other. As Mitchell intimates in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” the ambivalence toward otherness (specifically, the desire to overcome otherness versus the counter-desire to preserve the difference that ensures the other’s integrity) constitutes ekphrasis and may be indicative of the way we perform ethics, insofar as ethics concerns, in Levinas’s idiom, relation to and not thematization of an other. A somewhat weak reading of this analogy would suggest, along with Mitchell, that “[p]erhaps the key…to our ambivalence about ekphrasis is simply that it transfers into the realm of literary art sublimated versions of our ambivalence about social others. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with the Other” (702). A stronger reading—such as that which I perceive in Stevens’ rhetorical engagement with ekphrasis—would suggest that this is not a mere
sublimation of reality allowing the imagination to appease itself in play, but a critical figuration of the very conditions of ethics and the means by which we come to conceive of the world as community, as for oneself and others.

My invocation of Stevens’ late essay “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” is intended to illustrate two things. First, Stevens’ poetry is highly rhetorical and cannot be adequately appreciated outside of that framework. Second, the themes that concern Stevens are deeply woven into the fabric of his poetry and prose and constitutive of the unique representational language we have come to associate with his works and, therefore, they cannot always be approached directly. Such is the case with ekphrasis. A number of critics have written successfully on Stevens and art and the various ways that his poems have evoked, cited, performed, and been influenced by the major art movements, works, and practitioners of the twentieth century, but rarely have any of them considered Stevens’ ekphrastic practices. One reason for this is simply that Stevens did not often indulge in the ekphrastic genre. Bonnie Costello and Glen MacLeod have speculated on possible artistic influences for a number of Stevens’ compositions, but the influences are rarely evident in anything but an allusive technique. Even a rare example of the genre, like “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” cloaks its reference to an antecedent visual image in a symbolic rhetoric that has much less to do with the painting itself than the poet’s highly personal and abstract interpretation, rendering the poem’s inception virtually illegible to the uninitiated. A general consensus, therefore, has formed around Costello’s proclamation that “Stevens’ relation to painting is a far more figurative and conceptual one [than William Carlos Williams’]. He is less interested in the practice of painting than in its theory […]. He was less interested in the particulars of
technique…than in the condition of visual art and the special experience of beauty suggested within that condition” (66).

Indeed, one might surmise that in his approach to the visual arts, which has been characterized as philosophically experimental but practically conservative and aloof, Stevens resembled Lessing more than Pater, wishing to see the arts follow their own carefully delineated and distinct paths. But this, I believe, would be to put too much emphasis on Stevens’ expressed theory at the expense of his complex poetic practices and to maintain a distinction that Stevens’ poetry often seeks to undermine. We might be tempted to account for the gap between theory and practice as another instance of the reactionary poses Stevens often struck throughout his career, but I prefer to interpret this apparent resistance to the free exchange between the arts as advocating what art critic Clement Greenburg called in his 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon” the “willing acceptance[ ] of the limitations of the medium of the specific art” one practices in order to preserve its purity (32). For Greenberg, this has little to do with artistic autonomy per se and nothing to do with establishing an eternal standard of value in the arts: “[T]here is nothing in the nature of abstract art which compels it to be so. The imperative comes from history, from the age in conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art” (Greenberg 37). Like the abstract expressionists Greenberg discusses, Stevens is compelled by historical imperative to resist the dominant paradigm of an organicist poetics and to curb his chosen art’s past excesses, and he does this by turning decidedly back to the rhetorical medium of poetry.

It is unfair to call Stevens’ late career shift a lapse in either theory or practice. For it was his longstanding meditation on the relations between the verbal and visual arts that
allowed Stevens to bring aesthetic theory to bear on his poetry and to use his poetry as a productive reconstitution of the theories of composition and practice he espoused. In a poem like “The Pure Good of Theory” (1945), after all, Stevens does not seek mere intelligence, a self-enclosed, abstract knowledge, but a “sense...beyond intelligence” that might sustain a future (CP 331). Paradoxically, the “pure good” of Stevens’ poetry is something more like a “variegated pleasure,” a contemplated form that is not really a Platonic ideal but an ideal on vacation in shirtsleeves: “This platonic person discovered a soul in the world / And studied it in his holiday hotel. / He was a Jew from Europe or might have been” (CP 331). The constant reversals and adulterations of this poetry seek instead to make signify within the rhetoric of thought the sensations that make up a life, and within everyday speech the cultivating form of thought; which is to say that Stevens recognizes the rhetorical condition of human life and, rather than turn away, he turns his speech to think “Man, [...] / Like rhetoric in a narration of the eye” (CP 331).

2.

Both Bonnie Costello and Charles Altieri have recognized the paradoxical and self-qualifying rhetorical turn in Stevens’ poetry and have argued that as he seeks to avoid the reductive logic of what he sometimes pejoratively calls “rhetoric,” he embraces elaborate rhetorical strategies to give expression to “the figure and not / An evading metaphor” (CP 199). In the concluding line of “Add This to Rhetoric” (1942), which clarifies the title of the poem, Stevens gives perhaps the best possible expression to his intricate conception of rhetoric in poetry: “Add this. It is to add” (CP 199). That is, not only should we supplement rhetoric with the sensations that give rise to our metaphors
and transport them beyond the static pose, but we should in doing so change our very understanding of the rhetorical itself. The imagination can transport rhetoric beyond a mere representation, which speaks for a given constituency and time and subjugates to its normative regime any number of possible divergent interests and values, to formulate a representation that exceeds itself in its expression.

In this sense, rhetoric is not additive because it incorporates more and more in the effort to realize its totality; rather, it is additive, but only to the extent that we not forswear its communicative potential. It is additive because it adds possibility to the world. Its direction is outward, toward the other in whose presence community is founded. This rhetorical inflection is what makes of the relation between poetry and painting the “meta-analogy” that Costello speaks of and what makes the rhetoric of ekphrasis so illustrative of Stevens’ poetry. Neither simply a paragonal struggle for dominance, nor a movement toward the total eclipse of difference, the relation between the arts is reconceived as an ongoing rhetorical negotiation for expression between the one and the other, and therefore as the condition that gives rise to ethical communication. In *Planets on Tables*, Costello borrows from Stevens the beautiful figure of the “crude foyer” to theorize this communicative relation. “The foyer…and similar intermediate spaces,” she writes, connect the realms of the imagination and reality as “recurrent sites of this dialectical meditation, places where ‘here’ and ‘there’ meet and cross, and where the external and distant becomes intimate and near” (*Planets* 21). But even more importantly these spaces facilitate the possibility of (and also potentially the negation of) ethical exchange: “In the foyer the distant other becomes the potential ‘interior paramour’” (*Planets* 21). The rhetorical efforts of Stevens’ poetry can be understood as a
means of constructing these communicative spaces between the world of the self and the world of others, and thereby potentially resisting the simple coopting of the one by the other.

Whereas several critics have approached this issue by examining the status of painting in Stevens’ poetry, I propose a different tack. The figure of sculpture, it seems to me, plays an equally formative role in Stevens’ work, one that has not received as much critical attention. This is surprising given that Thomas F. Walsh’s *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* cites a combined fifty-eight uses of terms referring to sculpture and only thirty-two referring to painting. Readers familiar with Stevens’ prose will also note that sculpture plays an expository role in his essays. Section 2 of “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1941), for example, considers the expression of “nobility” in two statues: Verrocchio’s *Bartolommeo Colleoni*, located in the Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, and Clark Mills’ *Andrew Jackson* in Lafayette Square, Washington D. C. (NA 7-11). Stevens’ preoccupation with sculpture had great precedence in theories of aesthetics. Lessing’s fundamental contrast of poetry with painting (i.e., of the verbal with visual arts) actually takes the example of the sculpture, with its three-dimensional presence and complete restriction to the domain of spatial expression, as the sine qua non of the visual arts. Painting itself was a slightly more adulterated medium of representation in the regime of natural sign aesthetics because of its reduction of the representative object to an image on a two-dimensional surface and its reliance on the technical apparatuses of perspective to sustain the illusion of mimetic fidelity to reality, just as the “lesser” poetry of the lyric was often considered a highly-mediated version of the more ideal temporal arts of epic or drama.
Stevens’ use of the statue as a figure is especially prevalent in the major poetry of his middle and later periods, starting with the problematic “Owl’s Clover” (1936), in which Stevens set himself the task of directly engaging the imaginative possibilities of the political realm, and extending into the late meditative lyric “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949). I would like to trace the development of this theme through a number of key poetic moments in Stevens’ career to demonstrate, first, that Stevens’ use of the statue as figure is a rhetorical practice perhaps best understood as ekphrastic, a dialectic interrogation into the communication that structures the arts; and, second, that this treatment of the statue exemplifies the attempt to move beyond the failed ethics of early modernist poetics and accommodate the responsibility toward others that the political climate of World War II had thrown into crisis. The way in which he treats sculpture reflects the rhetorical turn in his poetry as I am imagining it. In the poems I address here, the figure of the statue is posed as a potential figure of the imagination and then submitted to a dialectical analysis. In these poems, the work of the rhetorical imagination may be likened to its figure in that it attempts to “sculpt” the imaginative representations that would best serve its ethical aim; however, the critical work of the poems may be said to arise from the systematic subjection of the figure to its rhetorical conditioning, or the imaginative “de-sculpting” of the figure. The result is a poetics that articulates imaginative possibilities of ethical significance while resisting the reification of the imagination in static figurations that lend themselves too readily to ideological coercion.

Let me turn, then, to “Owl’s Clover,” the poem considered by many, and ostensibly by the poet himself since he chose to exclude it from his collected works, to be
the greatest failure of Stevens’ career. In his seminal study *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Harold Bloom calls “Owl’s Clover” “incontrovertibly Stevens’ poorest performance,” dedicating a paltry four pages to it (117). According to Bloom, all of Stevens’ successes and failures are structured around the struggle to realize a poetic Freedom (*logos*) by coming to terms with Fate (*ethos*) and embracing a will to power (*pathos*), a trend which can be traced back to Emerson and on through “the central line of American poets coming after him” (*Climate* 8). Bloom’s attempt to read Stevens’ poetry as struggling to overcome the divide between rhetoric as a system of tropes and rhetoric as persuasion still stands as perhaps the most thoroughgoing rhetorical theory of poetry in the American canon. But Bloom’s commitment to the will to power fails to think fully the ethical dimension of Stevens’ rhetoric. It is interesting to note that, in the same work, Bloom criticizes deconstruction as a rhetorical practice for remaining too subservient to the text and submitting to the prison-house of language:

> Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us *how to talk to ourselves*, rather than how to talk to others…. Deconstruction touches its limit because it cannot admit such a question [of persuasion]. For the deconstructive critic, a trope is a figure of knowing and not a figure of willing, and so such a critic seeks to achieve, in relation to any poem—or to find in that poem—a cognitive moment…. But what can a cognitive or epistemological moment in a poem be? Where the will predominates, even in its own despite, how much is there left to know? (*Climate* 387)

Bloom is right to question a criticism of disinvestment that refuses to interrogate the persuasive force of language in favor of a blind resignation to linguistic structure; however, I think he misrepresents deconstruction and even himself when he does not acknowledge that “will” and “strength” cannot be valued in and of themselves without accounting for the ways that knowledge submits them to its own ends (e.g., the “might equals right” political ideologies that are so readily adopted in states of emergency or
war). If the absolute eclipse of will by knowledge is ideologically suspect, so too must be an exuberant faith in the power of the will coupled with a blindness toward the epistemological regimes that will is bound to smuggle in. Perhaps in this instance, Joseph Riddel, the first critic to outspokenly argue for the value of reading “Owl’s Clover” seriously, is more discriminating in his analysis of the will underlying Stevens’ rhetoric: “Behind his rhetorical mode is the assumption that rational ideas of order are no more than forced and congealed manifestations of man’s primitive will for order” (122). In other words, Stevens implores us to recognize a will subsisting in imaginative language that is both the condition for a rational will and a perpetual resistance to that will, an anarchic (i.e., that which is against order and also prior to form/archē) force akin to “the man below the man below the man” in the last movement of “Owl’s Clover,” “Sombre Figuration”:

He dwells below, the man below, in less
Than body and in less than mind, ogre,
Inhabitant, in less than shape, of shapes
That are dissembled in vague memory
Yet still retain resemblances, remain
Remembrances […]. (OP 97)

These lines are indicative of the poem’s overall penchant for catachresis or the metaleptic re-signification of terms that again and again suggest a rhetorical will turned against itself. But lest we rest too assured in such epiphanies, we should take to heart Bloom’s critique: such discoveries gotten tend not to signify in a way that might remain ethical and not subject to reification in the said (the way of all speech) unless they can be articulated in movement. The lesson to be learned from “Owl’s Clover,” therefore, is not in the vision of the “subman,” the irrational motive for poetry, or in any other rhetorical figure. Rather, this figure provides the negative lesson that any tectical accumulation of
thought in a single figure leads to the failure or, at least, partial eclipse of the communicative potential of the imagination. The goal that Stevens attributes to the severely revised “Owl’s Clover” he included in *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* (1937)—“to isolate poetry” (*OP* 233)—is highly suspect and directly contrary to the ostensible values of the poem. The positive lesson is derived from the method of the poem, its dialectic engagement with the language of politics and its commitment to a rhetorical poetics. Contrary to what a number of scholars have stated or implied, however, Stevens does not renege on this commitment or relinquish his rhetoricality after the “failure” of this poem. Instead this poem serves to clarify and strengthen his poetic method in later years. I agree with Riddel when he calls “Owl’s Clover” Stevens’ first “intellectual lyric,” in the sense that it is Stevens’ first large-scale effort to realize a methodology for the meditative poetry that typifies his major years (123).

To date the best attempt to interrogate the method of “Owl’s Clover” has been Angus J. Cleghorn’s. Indeed, he finds the poem so significant to the understanding of Stevens’ career that he devotes two chapters to its analysis in *Wallace Stevens’ Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric*. Indebted overall to Cleghorn’s attempt to trace the neglected rhetorical strategies within Stevens’ work, I derive inspiration for my reading of “Owl’s Clover” from two main arguments he presents in the book. The first of these is that Stevens’ use of rhetoric “invalidates taxonomic divides between politics and aesthetics by demonstrating their symbiosis” (Cleghorn 3). “Owl’s Clover” is the best testament to this claim as it was inspired, at least in part, by Stanley Burnshaw’s review of Stevens’ *Ideas of Order* (1936) published in *The New Masses* and thereby marks Stevens’ first explicit engagement of the challenge of politics that faced the intellectuals of the Depression.
era.\textsuperscript{47} In his rather self-deprecating retrospective on the times, his views as a young Marxist critic, and Stevens’ unprecedented response in the form of “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” Burnshaw accedes that he was in many respects ill-equipped to understand or receive the kind of poetry Stevens had begun to write in his second book. Glossing the naïve political \textit{Weltanschauung} of the 1930s left, Burnshaw writes, “The world, so pleasingly simple, [was] divided according to one groundplan only: We (Left), They (Right), and You (Left, Right, or Middle), with the Escapists in limbo” (362). Politics had become to many of this generation the first principle and no concerns, including especially aesthetic ones, could be divorced from the necessity to choose sides without stooping to the lowest level of complicity in the exercises of oppressive powers. Burnshaw’s view of Stevens, it is clear from the review, was of a poet struggling to overcome his early flirtations with escapism and \textit{l’art pour l’art} in \textit{Harmonium} (1931) and to choose rightly, but finding the poet’s efforts lost in the amorphous middle ground Burnshaw doubted whether he could meet the challenge: “His harmonious cosmos is suddenly screeching with confusion. \textit{Ideas of Order} is the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance” (365). And indeed it does seem that Stevens suffered such doubts. In his first critical prose piece, “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), Stevens precluded any thought of escape before tentatively rehabilitating the notion of escapism in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1941) (\textit{OP} 230, \textit{NA} 30-31). Also, his letters reveal an acute desire to be seen as “heading left” in his poetry (\textit{L} 286). Despite these rather obvious prevarications, however, “Owl’s Clover” is roundly successful in overcoming Burnshaw’s political challenge. Burnshaw assumes that Stevens wishes to preserve the autonomous aesthetics
of the early twentieth century against the demands of the political situation even though his reading of the poetry registers a discomfort with this schema. In continually interrogating the statue from a number of rhetorical angles, “Owl’s Clover’s” first-order achievement is to demonstrate that politics suffer from the same complicity with the regimes of power that Burnshaw and many others attribute to aesthetics. Each is equally imbricated in the practice of power and as rhetorical practices they borrow from each other in shaping the positions available to their subjects. Therefore, in order to counteract the rigidifying, reductionist, and oppressive nature of these practices, Stevens devotes himself to divulging what he calls “an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning” (OP 231). This is the communicative potential of rhetoric that intercedes to forestall the immature closure of rhetorical positions and the formation of fixed principles. What Burnshaw fails to understand is that, having deconstructed the division between politics and aesthetics, Stevens does not abandon the one for the other in turning back incessantly to the imagination. What he is after is a force of the imagination that through its intervention is able to interrogate and revise the structures of aesthetic practice and is therefore capable of resisting the stagnation or excessive determination of aesthetic values. Imagination conceived in this manner would be both responsive to the political challenges of the Depression era and World War II and would also be equivalent to preserving a political value for the imagination—not the kind that is commanded by a leader or political doctrine, Stevens wrote in “The Noble Rider,” but the kind that “gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (NA 31).
3.

The first poem of “Owl’s Clover” functions as an overture to the rest of the work and so will best illustrate Stevens’ attempt to undermine the conceptual divide of the political and aesthetic realms and demonstrate their shared rhetorical articulation. “The Old Woman and the Statue,” of all the movements of “Owl’s Clover,” is the most self-sufficient. It opens upon a brief theme that receives elaboration throughout the poem and serves as the staging-ground for an allegorical encounter of the aesthetic and political discourses:

Another evening in another park,
A group of marble horses rose on wings
In the midst of a circle of trees, from which the leaves
Raced with the horses in bright hurricanes. (OP 75)

One infers from the prosaic stage description opening the poem the speaker’s weary dissatisfaction with the world, but from the culminating image of leaves and horses racing “in bright hurricanes” the strong desire to see that world reactivated and brought to a new pitch of significance. Perhaps most striking in this brief opening, however, are the two possible rhetorical poses, one distinctively Romantic and the other modernist, the poem imagines to negotiate the speaker’s problem. The first draws upon the tradition of the Romantic problem lyric by identifying a state of dejection, characterized by the persona’s lack of connection with the world (nature), and then imaginatively envisioning the means of reconnecting with the world. But like the Romantic problem lyric, this pose suffers from the fatal flaw of doubt in the powers of the imagination and seems an unlikely solution to the speaker’s problem. The other pose resembles the imagist mantra with its stress on direct treatment of the thing. Like Pound’s exemplary lines—“The apparition of these faces in a crowd; / Flowers on a wet, black bough.”—these would
offer a rarefied language that seeks treatment of the thing alone: the copula drops out and
the objects assert themselves to take precedence over any extraneous context. But this
modernist rhetoric still leaves doubts in the reader’s mind because it cannot totally efface
the unease of the opening line. From this kernel the rest of the poem extrapolates the need
to discover some other aesthetic means of egress from the yet to be identified, but clearly
threatening problem. Section II elaborates on the glimmer of aesthetic hope of section I
by parading forth an argument for artistic dominion, and specifically for the artist himself
to take the world in hand and shape it to his desire:

So much the sculptor had foreseen: autumn,
The sky above the plaza widening
Before the horses, clouds of bronze imposed
On clouds of gold, and green engulfing bronze,
The marble leaping in the storms of light.
So much he had devised… (OP 75)

This explication may at first appear to be a positive depiction of the artist’s power,
especially given the extent of his foresight. Not only does he draw the natural world into
his provenance, but he seems to have a limitless store of artistic powers at his disposal:
the sculpting of the horses and the sky give way to the painterly “imposition” of clouds
and color and the choreography of marble and light. The more his powers increase,
however, the greater seems the potential for an oppressive reduction to a single artistic
vision, a danger expressed in the foreboding repetition crowning the depiction: “More
than his muddy hand was in the manes, / More than his mind in the wings” (OP 75). The
sculptor seems less of a paragon of artistry than a Nietzschean Over-Man who violently
subdues the world to remake it in his image. In fact his violence is so forceful that it
outstrips the artist’s vision for the statue, opening the way for a corruption of its effects:
“feathery wings” are degraded to “Clumped carvings, circular, like blunted fans, /
Arranged for phantasy” (OP 75). It is important to recognize that Stevens would not easily submit to charges of aesthetic dandyism or a lack of concern with political or ideological matters, as he makes more than clear in the beginning stages of this poem. By the end of section II, the faith in a Romantic/modernist aesthetics of the author has already been undercut before the question of politics has even been breeched, and that precisely by means of a critique of the violent dominion everyday associated with the rise to power of figures like Hitler and Mussolini. In this way, Stevens lays the groundwork for perceiving the shared rhetorical structures undergirding the discourses of politics and poetry. From its inception, it seems, “The Old Woman and the Statue” critically turns away from the overwrought glory of its catchphrase, “How clearly that would be defined!” for something more radically contingent (OP 78).

But if a pure aesthetics is not the answer, neither is a pure politics it seems. An even greater bane for a responsive aesthetic than the threat of violent destruction at its own hand is the imposition of political will. The woman sometimes gets saddled, I believe wrongly, with a negative political interpretation. This reading relies too heavily on an oppositional reading of the poem’s title and Stevens’ views of the relations between art and politics. We should instead read the title as additive, in the manner discussed above, and interpret the poem’s basic problem not as how to subdue the political world to the aesthetic, but how to make available to this suffering woman the communicative potential of the aesthetic in a way that is politically significant. The poem therefore seeks a rhetorical passage: “What path could lead apart from what she was / And was to be?” (OP 76) Section II warned against the violent inclusiveness of authorial dominance and section III begins to imagine an aesthetic that moves outward toward the other who might
receive it. But the fulfillment of this communion is denied by the equally thwarting force of political determinism which governs the forms of what the old woman “was and was to be.” Because the woman issues from a political reality that dissembles its rhetorical condition and espouses the radical separation of political and aesthetic discourses, the statue is incapable of “touch[ing] her eye and [leaves] / Her ear unmoved” (OP 76). For Stevens, such a drastic occlusion of the rhetorical condition of life is akin to the total loss of self:

She was that tortured one,
So destitute that nothing but herself
Remained and nothing of herself except
A fear too naked for her shadow’s shape. (OP 76)

The possibility for reparation, Stevens intimates, persists, but it would involve a radical turn of the aesthetics of the statue against its own visual form and beyond its own limits: “Wings / And light lay deeper for her than her sight” (OP 76). Section IV momentarily considers the possibility of the political will forging such a rhetorical turn when the aesthetics of the statue seems to have reached its limits. Under the constant pressure of reality, no doubt the constant rise of hunger and unemployment and the mobilization of antidemocratic masses across Europe, the statue has no sway in the woman’s eyes and is rendered an inert “marble hulk.” The “black thought” of political reality easily dismantles the statue’s aesthetic by dominating “the moving colors there[,] Chang[ing them], at last to its triumphant hue” (OP 76). With reactionary fervor, the woman’s political will seizes upon the fraudulent statue to reveal its congealed and muddied medium—“Manes matted of marble across the air”—quite incapable of sustaining a rhetoric responsive enough for the revolutionary politics she desires. This domination of black extends to include the
whole field of vision, offering through the systematic disenchantment of the statue’s aesthetics a kind of negative aesthetics and a momentary clarity:

It was as if transparence touched her mind.  
The statue stood in stars like water-spheres,  
Washed over by their green, their flowing blue.  
A mood that had become so fixed it was  
A manner of the mind, a mind in the night  
That was whatever the mind might make of it,  
A night that was that mind so magnified  
It lost the common shape of night and came  
To be the sovereign shape in a world of shapes. (OP 77)

Engulfing the statue’s form, this negative vision seems to realize another form and another more fluid medium with colors of its own, though not unlike the marble’s original. And because it arises from a greater critical impulse, this new politically-oriented aesthetic is granted a greater rhetorical potential than the authorial dominance of the statue’s aesthetic. The statue’s aesthetics had excluded the woman and her black concerns, whereas this one offers the “woman walking in the autumn leaves” a means of access to her world, a way of “looking at the place in which she walked” (OP 77). But it too ultimately suffers from domination by the sovereign will that desires only its own “shape in a world of shapes,” bringing about the closure of rhetorical signification and abandoning the woman to a world “in which each thing was motionless / Except the thing she felt but did not know” (OP 77).

The final section of “The Old Woman and the Statue” offers neither a resolution of the failed aesthetics depicted nor an attempt to discard the problem and return to the world of poetry as might be suspected from the opening hypothesis:

Without her, evening like a budding yew  
Would soon be brilliant, as it was, before  
The harridan self and ever-maladive fate  
Went crying their desolate syllables… (OP 77)
Instead it seems to offer a nostalgic indulgence so obviously inappropriate to the preceding dialectic that the reader immediately revolts from the ironic push toward closure. The function of this movement to finally dismiss the woman seems to me twofold. First, it draws one to the edge of an interpretive precipice, a limit that leaves one no realistic option except to turn back and rehearse the “sculpting” and “de-sculpting” of the rhetorical models offered. In microcosm, this can serve as a model of the “form” of this difficult poem that never seems to get anywhere. The four poems that comprise the rest of the work all repeat this continual recreation and decreation of the statue in order to reinforce the poetic and political necessity to turn aside from fixed ends and embrace the rhetorical flux that is the guarantor of communication. This development of a rhetorical aesthetic founded on the method rather than the products of the imagination brings us to a second purpose of the final section, which again points to a macrocosmic principle in Stevens’ work. The nostalgic interlude serves as a means of bringing Stevens’ ideally interminable principle of rhetoric into line with the requirements of his poetic form, which requires closure. But in order to ensure the critical value of his method, Stevens often formulates the closures of form on fundamentally unstable figures, often marked by irony or paradox, in this case a nostalgic call for the pure aesthetics of “a smooth domain / Untroubled by suffering,” where “The horses would rise again, / Yet hardly to be seen” (OP 77-78). Formulating such closure unsettles the reader and alternately invokes the rage for order or the rage for rhetoric anew. And as a consistent motivating principle of Stevens’ poetry this serves the ethical ends of propelling the imagination beyond its historically determined constraints to think the other as well as strengthening poetry’s investment in rhetoric.
The analysis of “The Old Woman and the Statue” as formally representative of “Owl’s Clover” as a whole not only corroborates Cleghorn’s claim that Stevens’ poetry breaks down unhelpful divisions between art and politics, but also the other major claim that Stevens’ method during the 1930s and 40s particularly combats “monumental aesthetics and politics.” “‘Monumentalism,’” Cleghorn clarifies, “refers to rigid artforms such as the Statue, and more extensively points to the human habit of forging definition and mastery upon dynamic phenomena that cannot be fixed” (18). The term is fortuitous because it points directly to the kind of aesthetics that Stevens criticizes throughout “Owl’s Clover.” The “monument” is a state-sanctioned statue “a solid, fixed form of representation[,] … a rigid masculine art form that is supposed to withstand change. As such, it stands counter to Stevens’ poetics of flux” (Cleghorn 55). The distinction between a responsive art form and one that promulgates unquestioned regimes of power is useful for understanding Stevens’ critique, but also slippery to the extent that it stresses formal distinctions over the rhetorical conditioning of those forms. Stevens does not mean to privilege one form over another and Cleghorn at times risks the oversimplified equation of the statue as a figure with state art. The statue or even the statue-as-monument can serve a valuable imaginative purpose as Stevens allows in his discussion of Verrocchio’s Bartolommeo Colleoni in “The Noble Rider.” In this case, the statue is obviously a monumental symbol of the state but it also exceeds total reduction to this regime of power to give its viewers “a form of such nobility that it has never ceased to magnify us in our own eyes” (NA 8). Given forms, as Cleghorn sometimes mistakenly suggests, are not essentially antagonistic to rhetorical treatment or precluded from enhancing the kind of rhetoric Stevens values. Forms, like any artistic convention, are
rhetorically conditioned and thus always susceptible to revision. Stevens’ adversary is not
the statue, monument, or any formal structure, per se, but the habit of bringing rhetoric to
a close, the ‘monumentalization’ of form as a self-enclosed structure no longer available
to practices of rhetorical negotiation.

For this reason, I find Cleghorn’s temptation to call Stevens’ poetics “destructive”
misrepresentative. For all the critical dismantling or violent effacement the statue
undergoes in “Owl’s Clover,” it rises again and again to receive a new rhetorical
treatment in each of its sections. Therefore, the figure of the statue is best understood not
as an adversarial formal principle, but an ekphrastic frame for interrogating the rhetorical
negotiation of form which aids in the disavowal of ‘monumentalist’ aesthetics and
politics. Evidence that Stevens seeks the interrogation of form rather than its destruction
can be found in his treatment of the statue throughout the remaining sections of “Owl’s
Clover,” but particularly in “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue.” Any reading of the second
poem in the sequence, it seems to me, must hinge upon the rhetorical question posed by
whom we presume to be the young Marxist, Stanley Burnshaw, in the manipulative hands
of a ventriloquist:

Shall you,
Then, fear a drastic community evolved
From the whirling, slowly and by trial; or fear
Men gathering for a mighty flight of men,
An abysmal migration into a possible blue? (OP 82)

Context does not offer the enlightenment necessary to determine Burnshaw’s unstated
position on this question; or, rather, it offers evidence for either position, rendering the
issue undecidable. As a Marxist, Burnshaw presumably would value both the historical
materialist struggle of a “drastic community evolved … slowly and by trial” and the
revolutionary promise of a “mighty flight of men … migrat[ing] into a possible blue.” But each position is equally shaky because of the implication that it rests at best upon a random “whirling” flux, or at worst upon a nihilistic “abysmal” change for which a political ideology like Marxism cannot account. How to appropriate the problematic flux that will not submit to determination, therefore, becomes the central challenge presented by the statue in this poem. The first option offered by Burnshaw is a purely destructive aesthetic: “Always everything / That is is dead except what ought to be. / All things destroy themselves or are destroyed” (OP 78). Interestingly, the initial form this destructive aesthetic takes is music, which not only opposes the static visual presence of the statue, but serves also as a figure for the negation of aesthetics. Music occupies a unique position in Western aesthetics: to many it has served as a limit case, both the idealization of art and the radical exception of art. According to Pater, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” because it achieves “the constant effort of art to obliterate” the distinction between matter and form (106). Music is art’s ultimate achievement, but also the condition for realizing its defunctness. It is this latter possibility that Burnshaw exploits, for despite his “Astral and Shelleyan” attempts to “diffuse new day,” he actually seeks the complete subsumption of aesthetics to reality and not aesthetic transformation:

Agree: the apple in the orchard, round
And red, will not be redder, rounder then
Than now. No: nor the ploughman in his bed
Be free to sleep there sounder, for the plough
And the dew and the ploughman still will best be one.
But this gawky plaster will not be there. (OP 79)

In this “world impossible for poets,” in which reality merely resounds itself in imagination, the statue's rubble is re-inscribed as an anti-art:
The stones
That will replace it shall be carved, “The Mass
Appoints These Marbles Of Itself To Be
Itself:” No more than that, no subterfuge,
No memorable muffing, bare and blunt. (*OP 80*)

The fundamental irony of this wholly destructive vision, however, is captured in the pun on “mass.” Whereas Burnshaw seeks in this word the fulfilled wish of a mobilized conglomerate of political allies, he finds merely the failure to derive from reality any transcendent principle but the cold, unworked matter of an abandoned aesthetic. His failure lies not in seeking a different aesthetic, but in his attempts to suppress the aesthetic “subterfuge” of rhetoric altogether. Without this “memorable muffing,” upon which art and politics have always depended for effect, Burnshaw is incapable of imagining the revolutionary community he desires, except to imagine that “disorder may … have an order of its own, a peace / Not now to be perceived yet order’s own” (*OP 80*).

As if in appeasement of this flitting turn from a rage for destruction toward a new order, “A solemn voice, not Mr. Burnshaw’s” offers at this point an alternative treatment of the statue. Like Burnshaw, this voice confronts an aesthetic he perceives to be dead and duly gives it funereal treatment “[a]t some gigantic, solitary urn, / A trash can at the end of the world” (*OP 80-81*). Unlike Burnshaw, however, this voice lingers mournfully over the statue’s decomposition as if it could still find in it something of value for “the living [who] turn away.” Again Stevens evokes Shelley, who famously imagined not only a world possible for poets but of their own making as its “unacknowledged legislators,” with his reinterpretation of the ruins of Ozymandius:

[A]nd there the sun
Shines without fire on columns intercrossed,
White slapped on white, majestic, marble heads,
Severed and tumbled into seedless grass,
Motionless, knowing neither dew nor frost.
There lies the head of the sculptor in which the thought
Of lizards, in its eye, is more acute
Than the thought that once was native to the skull;
And there are the white-maned horses’ heads, beyond
The help of any wind or any sky:
Parts of the immense detritus of a world
That is completely waste, that moves from waste
To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past
Into a hopeful waste to come. (OP 81)

Like Shelley’s “Ozymandius,” this segment meditates on the powers of art and politics and their respective fates, but with some significant revisions. One recalls that Shelley’s lines offer a strong, albeit highly anxious, vindication of the powers of art. While Ozymandius’ works have been consigned to oblivion, the sculpture memorializing his dominance, though toppled and “shattered,” still “stands,” speaking its mysteries to the world. More than simply an appraisal of art’s longevity, however, this is a vindication of the eternal vision of the artist: “[I]ts sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things.” And even if the visual remnants of this “colossal wreck” are in danger of being engulfed by the sublime vision of the “lone and level sands stretch[ing] far away,” the transformative power of art still triumphs through the endurance of the traveler’s story (Shelley 320).

Stevens’ depiction is markedly different in a number of respects. Unlike Shelley’s, Stevens’ sculptor shares in the fate of his work, a curious twist that challenges both the Romantic reverence for the genius of the artist and the modernist cult of impersonality and artistic autonomy. The visionary powers that survive and yet provide clarity in Shelley’s poem are here rendered opaque, mere reflections of the “thought / Of lizards” passing. And the “white-maned horses’ heads” lie beyond the definition that “any wind or any sky” might provide, mute reflections of their maker’s demise. If there is
any hope to arise from this alternate vision, something to make the waste slightly less
monolithic than it otherwise seems, it lies in the prophetic wish of an artistic age to come:

    The colorless light in which this wreckage lies
    Has faint, portentous lustres, shades and shapes
    Of rose, or what will once more rise to rose,
    When younger bodies, because they are younger, rise
    And chant the rose-points of their birth… (OP 81)

The “de-sculpting” movement of these lines discovers forms, “shades and shapes / Of
rose,” that hold more rhetorical promise than the cold stones Burnshaw reveres. They
momentarily seem like the way out of the deadly stasis of Romantic and modernist
aesthetics. But like Stevens’ later iteration of this theme in “The Man on the Dump,” the
speaker here has come to believe that he “see[s] / As a man (not like an image of a man)”
(CP 202). Thinking he has perceived the “two lights” of reality and imagination
“commingle” in a single image, he fails to recognize the forceful reduction this image
makes of politics and art. As social practices, politics and art during the 1930s were
equitably viewed as “whirling apart and wide away.” The solution to view them as
“immense / Reflections” of one another, however, was not only an inaccurate depiction
of reality, but also a potentially dangerous conflation of political and aesthetic forms of
action. What it does not allow is that the realms of politics and art can remain separate
and still be mutually informed by shared rhetorical practices. Although it demonstrates a
critical edge in seeking to move beyond problematic Romantic and modernist
formalisms, this re-envisioning of the statue still succumbs to a violent reduction of form
that negates its rhetorical promise.

    “Burnshaw” considers this as so much trash. For him, the only consistent
principle is change and any resistance to it is nothing short of escapist indifference. We
already know, however, that his idea of change is not responsive enough to resist the monumentalizing pose of reductionist politics because of his continued insistence on an oppositional rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is in his final soliloquy that we receive the most promising treatment of the statue. He admonishes his “paramours” (presumably those young artists he seeks to recruit for the cause of revolution) to

> Conceive that while you dance the statue falls,
> The heads are severed, topple, tumble, tip
> In the soil and rest. Conceive that marble men
> Serenely selves, transfigured by the selves
> From which they came, make real the attitudes
> Appointed for them and that the pediment
> Bears words that are the speech of marble men. (OP 83)

This is a difficult passage that continues to surge forth in a magnificent proliferation of speech with little clue as to its true desired end offered except the discovery of a speech of pure flux. The seventeen lines that comprise the close of the poem, one conjectures, must be an attempt to embody the language of “liv[ing] incessantly in change.”

Nevertheless, one perceives in these penultimate lines one final attempt to rehearse the deconstructive and reconstructive handling of the statue. Cleghorn interprets thus:

> Stevens first kills the fictive Statue trope by pointing to its fallibility, buries it, and, with no mourning, reconstructs its fictional potency. Having then established a potent poetry able to destroy the Statue, the poet quickly regenerates a parallel fulfillment with the “marble men,” already subverted. In doing this, Stevens shows how change concurs in different groups, for different purposes. (76)

For once, it seems that this now familiar process of decreation has not only articulated but begun to realize some of its rhetorical portents. By finally drawing attention to the motivations that shape the use of a figure like the statue—a vital rhetorical element that was not explicitly acknowledged in Burnshaw’s forceful destruction of the statue and the interceding visionary’s conflation of politics and art—these lines “display[ ] just how
arbitrarily power is monumentalized through inscribed social appointments” (Cleghorn 77). But more importantly, these lines, with their focus on “marble men,” “selves,” and “attitudes,” restore a human context for these rhetorical motivations, so that even though they may be arbitrarily subject to the manipulation of power they are seen to always have human ends and fundamentally impinge on human community and communication. It is this ethical opening onto the communal dimension of rhetorical practice that gives figures like these “marble men / Serenely selves, transfigured by the selves / From which they came” significance. They and their descendents, the major men and women of Stevens’ 1940s poetry who become the possibilities of thought, “revolving…in crystal” (CP 407), are the efforts to realize an ethically restorative poetry during the troubled decades of the mid-twentieth century. That this is only glimpsed in potentia in “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” and “Owl’s Clover” as a whole, is a testament to the work’s formative role for Stevens in terms of discovering a rhetorical method that could shoulder the burdens, aesthetic and political, facing modernist poetry at its critical limit. Like “The Old Woman and the Statue,” “Mr. Burnshaw” avoids any conclusion that can be countenanced as a solution. Its apocalyptic explosion in “freshest, brightest fire” is yet another attempt to subsume rhetoric to a reductive aesthetic principle of unity (OP 83). In the remaining poems of “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens continued to subject elements of this conflict, including the reductive political and aesthetic principles behind policies of colonialism and global expansion in “The Greenest Continent” and the dangers of trying to submit the quickly diversifying American population to homogenizing political or aesthetic agendas in “A Duck for Dinner.”
4.

Having clarified the need for a rhetorical poetry that could begin to address the demands of the increasing pressure of reality in the mid-twentieth century, and having considered Stevens’ proactive attempt to realize a method that could help him achieve this goal in a major poem written in the years leading up to World War II, I will now attempt to elucidate the development of this poetics during his major period. Namely, I would like to devote the last phase of my chapter to an examination of how Stevens turned this rhetorical poetics to ethical ends or what Gerald Bruns calls the problem of “what to do about other people.” That this problem presupposes ethics can be discerned in Stevens’ ongoing desire for a rhetoric that seeks community with others rather than the manipulation or persuasion of others, upon which the representative paradigm is often premised. Critics have taken Stevens at his word that poetry “help[s] people to live their lives” (NA 29), but this obligation is not fully understood, I contend, except insofar as poetry teaches us how to live and what to do in relation to others. Anecdotally, it might be helpful to recall here that Stevens, as late as 1954, considered adding an additional section, entitled “It Must Be Human,” to his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942) but did not in the interest of “leav[ing] well enough alone” (L 863-64). It may be that he decided against this revision because he was reluctant to associate his poetry with humanism, a cultural tradition that had been turned on its head by the horrific demonstration of the human potential to command technology, bureaucracy, and political will to the point of self-destruction. Certainly, he chose to forego these additions to his masterwork because human relation was already implicit if not expressly stated in the rhetorical poetics he forged in the last two decades of his career. Section XIX of 1943’s
“Chocorua to Its Neighbor” best exemplifies the human focus of Stevens’ rhetorical attempts to discover “acutest speech.” Articulation of human values in a time of war, in a time wracked by such violence as to call into question the very need for such values, requires nothing short of an entire revaluation of values, Stevens professes with Nietzschean flare in his World War II poetry. But unlike Nietzsche, Stevens does not seek the overman whose actions violently reconstitute the category “human” beyond good and evil. Poetry does not “say more than human things with human voice,” nor “say human things with more / Than human voice;” such things “cannot be,” he claims (CP 300). He desires a poetry that can “speak humanly,” preserving the many possibilities human relation can sustain, without radical transcendence and the violence that the move beyond the human entails: “To speak humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things, that is acutest speech” (CP 300). This speech, which becomes a central motif in the later poems, is premised on a rhetoric that resists the persuasive or consummate will to knowledge and preserves the human “truth” underlying all language. Truth deserves this particular designation of rhetoric because it is not made of forms, images or metaphors alone—what Stevens calls in “The Noble Rider” “the manifestations of which it is composed” (NA 35-36)—but of a “force” that mobilizes their articulation by the imagination and ensures the continuity of relation through language. In “Chocorua,” poetry’s speech is necessarily “human”: “It [this shadow spoken as a human thing] is an eminence, / But of nothing, trash of sleep that will disappear / […] and yet remain, yet be” (CP 300). The ultimate wager of this rhetorical poetics is that it might discover a speech that will persist and endure as the possibility of ethics.
Before continuing to examine Stevens’ use of the statue figure in his major poems, I would like to consider the ethical function a rhetorical poetics can serve by means of another key intervention into Western aesthetics that will help clarify the challenge of Stevens’ later poetry on the grounds of ethics. I am speaking of the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s 1948 essay “Reality and Its Shadow.” Unlike Lessing, Shelley, and Pater, whose works—certainly in the case of the latter two—Stevens knew intimately, Levinas is not a likely source of inspiration for the poet on aesthetic matters. Furthermore, despite the fact that Stevens was conversant in continental philosophy and knew the work of such notable French philosophers as Bergson, Alain, Weil, Camus, Sartre, and Blanchot, it is likely that he had little to no familiarity with Levinas’s work. Nevertheless, I think it imperative to draw the connection between these two figures not because of any mislaid influence, but because they both shared in the attempt to rethink ethics in the middle of the twentieth century; in Stevens’ case as a response to the reductive and agonistic political scene he encountered in 1930s-America and the violent reports of World War II he sifted and judged from afar, and in Levinas’ largely as a response to the cultural trauma faced by the survivors of the Holocaust.

Partial contemporaries, however, they share not only some historical circumstances but, more importantly, an approach to ethics that eschews moral prescriptivism for a responsive way of thinking so as to preserve one’s fundamental relation to others. They both engage, in their respective domains of poetry and philosophy, in what Jacques Derrida calls “an Ethics of Ethics.” But this alignment of a poet with a philosopher on the common agenda of rethinking an ethical language that the tradition of Western philosophy has continually attempted to suppress or betray is problematic in that Levinas
is notoriously suspicious of the aesthetic and often dismisses it on ethical grounds. For Levinas, the aesthetic and all of its attendant categories of “rhetoric,” “the image,” and “representation” are suspect to the degree that they cooperate in the violent reduction of the other to the same that characterizes the metaphysical tradition. Partially, my aim in drawing this connection is to demonstrate that Levinas’s objection to the aesthetic as a category is, like Stevens’ objections to Romantic/modernist aesthetics, an objection to institutionalized static conceptions of aesthetic form that seek to efface their rhetorical determination. This dual approach, with-the-grain of Levinas’s ethical critique and against-the-grain of his rhetorical critique, will hopefully reveal that alongside a philosophical recovery of ethics one can also imagine a literary ethics.

In Altered Reading, Jill Robbins provides the most concentrated effort to rethink Levinas’s undeniable antipathy toward the aesthetic. She argues that Levinas’s discourse “is directed against the figurative or rhetorical dimension of language,” and that it takes precedence in this from both the Platonic exclusion of art on imitative grounds and the Judaic proscription of idolatry (Robbins 50). This general framework for understanding Levinas’s approach to the aesthetic is corroborated in the first section of “Reality and Its Shadow,” in which Levinas clarifies his intentions to demonstrate both that art is “situated outside of ‘being in the world’” and is therefore irresponsible, and that criticism is not merely secondary but the responsible “intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind” (RS 131). The remainder of the essay attempts to justify this claim that criticism is an ethical discourse because it brings art back into the realm of truth (which is the realm of creation, of human society) through the process of interpretation, and that art is not
ethical because it is premised on evasion and the substitution of the image for an object.

For a thinker who is so attentive to the reductive violence of philosophy when it comes to ethics, however, Levinas seems at times somewhat naïve in his reduction of the aesthetic. His conception rests too easily on the belief that the aesthetic image always seeks to replace, eclipse, or even annihilate the object it represents, which is another way of saying that Levinas “subsum[es] all rhetoric under the category of persuasion, then reject[s] it as ruse and violence” (Robbins 53). Such absolute contrariety toward rhetoric, however, often runs up against its limit in Levinas’s ethical philosophy, which expresses the undeniably rhetorical hope of articulating the ethical Saying within the Said. At one moment, Levinas hesitates on the brink of acknowledging this alternative rhetorical paradigm but then turns away. First, he turns aside from the Platonic question of mimesis: “The discussion over the primacy of art or of nature—does art imitate nature or does natural beauty imitate art?—fails to recognize the simultaneity of truth and image” (RS 136). But before he can fully interrogate the consequences of a claim that renders reality coextensive with its representation, Levinas reiterates the Judaic tradition by claiming that an image is “a stoppage of time,” a doubling and immobilizing of reality into “a fixity [that] is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic” (RS 137, 139). This is essentially the fixity against which Stevens opposed his rhetorical poetics in “Owl’s Clover,” except with the considerable difference that Levinas seems to eclipse the rhetoric without which dialectic interrogation is moot and thereby preclude the possibility of a recovery of the aesthetic. This seems all the more unacceptable when at the end of the essay Levinas acknowledges, as if beside himself, that “[m]odern literature … manifests a more and
more clear awareness of this fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry” and that the modern artist displays a more critical intellectualism in “needing to interpret his myths himself” (RS 143). The contradiction here suggests that Levinas’s ethical critique would better be understood through the recuperation of rhetoric, conceived outside of the narrow limits of persuasion, as a positive. Robbins summarizes this point: “In short, if figure, rhetoric, mimesis, the literary were not what Levinas takes them to be, then it might be necessary not to turn away from figure, as Levinas does, but to face the figure otherwise, as language’s ownmost figurative potential, as that which is most distinctive to language, that is, to face language as ethical possibility” (54). Such a reading would also suggest that, as the discourse that best facilitates the performance of this figurative potential, literature may be recuperated as an ethical positive not to be positioned “above reality,” as Levinas fears, but among the various discourses, which certainly also include the political and the spiritual, that together allow for the articulation of “the supreme value[s] of civilization” (RS 131, 142).

If we read Levinas against himself in order to recuperate an ethical rhetoric, then it is possible to conceive of “Reality and Its Shadow” as a rhetorical intervention in the theory of aesthetic form which sharpens the critical edge of an argument like Lessing’s *Laocoon*. Levinas makes his debt to Lessing apparent by “affirm[ing] that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue—a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself” (RS 137). For Lessing, the complete cessation of time and adoption of space as its medium is constitutive of the form of the visual arts, as opposed to poetry. Levinas explodes this principle to encompass the arts as a whole, which because they cannot transcend the “impersonal and anonymous instant” are the
Art’s rhythmic movement in images, or rather its total cessation of movement, is alien to human life, the experience of which is the premise of the ethical relation. “Fate,” Levinas warns, “has no place in life. The conflict between freedom and necessity in human action appears in reflection: when action is already sinking into the past, man discovers the motifs that necessitated it” (RS 138). Under the influence of the arts, “the power of freedom congeals into impotence” and history is plasticized into myth (RS 139). In Levinas’s cosmology, ethics is primary and being secondary. Insofar as being subsists in self-enclosed freedom, it has to be opened by the rupture of the other in order to find passage to the Good. Art, in this schema, is relegated to a tertiary, or worse, non-relative position; it falls on the hither side of being, immobilized prior to even the self-enclosure of being. But if art can be reconceived as espousing its own critical reflection and thereby able to disrupt the “tragic, simultaneity of necessity and liberty,” it might also be reimagined as capable of forging an ethical relation (RS 138-39). The practice of such aesthetics would require a rhetorical inflection that would allow it to reflect upon “the motifs that necessitate [action]” while denying their fixity and the possible closure of future action. Such imaginative rhetoric, it seems, was essential to Levinas in the formulation of his mature ethics, particularly as that ethics turns upon the idea of the “immemorial,” though he nowhere acknowledges it. Writing on this theme in the context of post-Holocaust memory, R. Clifton Spargo explains that the “immemorial” often signifies in Levinas’s work as “a difficult, subjective praxis of remembrance,” in which the play of memory is submitted to “a vigilance long before it achieves any ideational content” and therefore “always unquiets the commemorative
reach of our remembrance.” Spargo further clarifies how this unquieting movement operates in the manner of an ethical critique of historical representations of memory:

The immemorial quality of Levinasian memory supposes a critique of all commemorative resolutions of the past... What Levinas insists upon with considerable consistency for the early to the later work is a remembrance reverting to the time of the other—not as a stultifying nostalgia that renders the present finally empty of significance but rather as a question signifying in inquietude that has effectively rended present time and challenged identity with the many obligations that remain unmet by already posited capabilities. The necessarily incompleted past defines ethics as always opening toward the other in a relation never to be finally accomplished. (VM 60)

Like this play of memory, the imaginative use of rhetoric persists beyond its limits (specifically, its figures), not in transcendence but in the realization of communication with others, in not returning to the same but moving continually forward toward the realization of communal obligations that have yet to be met. And like this play of memory, this persistence of rhetoric has the practical goal of keeping open the critical capacity for reflection and action in the articulation of aesthetic form (as this memory turns upon itself to open up history to intervention). Playing on yet another sense of the word, one begins to understand the use of the statue to represent the limit case for formalist aesthetics as an immemorial intervention into rhetorical use of the figure.

The immemorial treatment of the statue makes several appearances in Stevens’ major works, a few important examples of which I will here analyze. The first major return to the figure of the statue in the poetry occurs in the early years of World War II, in the ambitious works “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” (1942) and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942). Like its earlier treatment in “Owl’s Clover,” the statue once again serves the mediatory function of a rhetorical stopping point that is considered for its possibilities and then abandoned as too fixed and formal; however, the important
point to realize is not that the statue is an underprivileged form and always conceptually short of the imaginative resolution Stevens seeks, but that there can be no final form if the imagination is to meet the requirements of a communal speech open to the other and whatever possible form she might take. Whereas Stevens earlier uses this as a formal rhetorical strategy, in his later poems he begins to apply it to the subject matter a great deal more and uses it as a source of invention for confecting his supreme fictions.

In “Examination” and “Notes,” in particular, we see Stevens seizing upon the statue as a way of exploring the rhetorical possibilities of apotheosis, while resisting the closure of final form that apotheosis implies. But Stevens’ rhetorical strength can also prove his conceptual weakness to a number of readers. If we know that Stevens does not seek an arid formalism, then we might wonder why he devotes so much effort to figuring the “hero.” Perloff suspects that Stevens is perhaps too uncritical of the forms of hero-worship he sanctions during the time of such “major men” as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin (Revolving 59). And to the extent that Stevens can offer a motivation for an “examination of the hero,” it is highly ambiguous, as Bates has pointed out, because it stems from sources as diverse as fate, thought, reason, and desire (Mythology 241-42). Stevens himself can only conclude “Examination” with an ambiguous question that then places the poem’s subject under suspicion: “After the hero, the familiar / Man makes the hero artificial. / But was the summer false? The hero?” (CP 280). These questions are at least partially answered, however, by a rhetorical poetics that goes beyond merely demonstrating that the imagination’s figures are constructed. As we recall from Levinas, truth (the representative knowledge we derive from reality) and image (the figures we use to conceptualize real objects) appear simultaneously. From this we learn the very
practical lesson that there is no other world but the one of our own conception, a truth Stevens knew quite well: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else” (OP 189). That in itself is a rhetorical lesson, but what distinguishes Stevens’ rhetorical poetic is not the nihilistic conclusion that all is merely fiction, but the “exquisite truth” that a fiction can be posited, changed, and discarded as a shared but continually negotiated belief.

In the opening cantos of “Examination,” Stevens lights upon several historical conceptions of the hero and speculates that the most appropriate hero for 1942 might be the “common hero,” a projection of the “common man.” But he also worries that the common hero will lack a truly common value if left to the whims of fortune, “induced by nothing, / Unwished for, chance, the merest riding / Of the wind […]” (CP 275).

Attempting to navigate the extremes of anachronistic hero-worship and mere change, Stevens at this point addresses the soldier, but not simply as another heroic possibility:

. . . Soldier, think, in the darkness,
Repeating your appointed paces
Between two neatly measured stations,
Of less neatly measured common-places. (CP 275)

Although Perloff worries that overtly historical passages like this are momentary suspensions of Stevens’ evasive poetics that risk complicity with the established regimes of power and the violence of the “warlike whole,” we might extract from them a more promising hint of rhetorical acuity. The ellipses are a graphic symbol of his turn away from an unaware imaginative formalism toward a poetics that interrupts the exclusionary logic of formal autonomy. The soldier is admonished, it bears pointing out, to think beyond his typical role of preserving a cultural tradition—just as the poet admonishes himself to think beyond his “neatly measured” discourse—and imagine a more
responsive language of community. Perloff misses in such key moments Stevens’ efforts to imagine the “war between the mind / And sky” as a shared endeavor and the search for “faithful speech” as having more than a poetic motive (CP 407-08). As Bates perceptively corrects, Stevens’ “soldier poems” are in this manner actually more dynamic than often assumed and reach a greater responsive pitch during World War II: “Whereas the Great War group [of poems] locates the soldier in a closed world governed by fate and force, the later poems probe history for its openings and possibilities” (Soldier Poems 205). The heroic possibilities that Stevens evokes in his later poems devolve, so to speak, from the formalist tradition or cultural symbology of such tropes into this non-inclusive rhetorical interrogation of forms.

Under this transfer of rhetorical energies, Stevens is much more appreciative of the statue as a figure of rhetorical possibility, though he always retains in his descriptions of it a disdain for its symbolic fixity. In Canto VII of “Examination,” he again invokes the statue’s reductive autonomy but also dwells upon it as a field of negotiated ideas:

There are more heroes than marbles of them.  
The marbles are pinchings of an idea,  
Yet there is that idea behind the marbles,  
The idea of things for public gardens,  
Of men suited to public ferns . . . The hero  
Glides to his meeting like a lover  
Mumbling a secret, passionate message. (CP 276)

Stevens makes clear that he chooses the statue of the hero as a hypothetical example only because it could never, fixed as it is, express the plural, expansive conception of the hero in its rhetorical inception he wishes to retain. Be that as it may, he lingers upon this idea of the statue to underscore how it can induce receptivity to the imagination among a designated “public.” More ellipses intercede at this point, this time not to eclipse the
figure but to infuse it with an erotic significance typically withheld from the civic
sculpture designed to reinforce and concretize state power. His intimation of a “secret,
passionate message” locked beneath the statue’s frozen exterior also foregrounds the
ekphrastic impulse, which serves the critical function of lending a meaningful speech to a
mute image. That this potential communication with the artistic ideal is transferred from
the public spaces of civic duty to the secret locations of amorous rendezvous furthermore
underscores Stevens’ desire to find a rhetoric that can sustain both universal ideals and
individual passions.

Canto VIII acts upon its ekphrastic impulse a little more earnestly, drawing to
mind “The marbles / Of Xenophon.” Ostensibly, Stevens has no particular statuary in
mind, but he gives his description greater presence by first illustrating Xenophon’s
accoutrements, which presumably have nothing to do with our search for the hero but
lend his chosen figure, a soldier-poet-philosopher, an aura of nobility: “Neither his head
nor horse nor knife nor / Legend were part of what he was, forms / Of a still-life” (CP
276). Again he turns aside from this mute symbolism to call to mind the hero in his
abstraction:

The marbles of what he was stand
Like a white abstraction only, a feeling
In a feeling mass, a blank emotion,
An anti-pathos, until we call it
Xenophon, its implement and actor. (CP 276-77)

Tellingly, Stevens isolates for evaluation in this mute form an “anti-pathos,” which
awaits the correction of rhetorical investment to make it act upon us. But this anti-pathos
is not strictly speaking anti-rhetorical, although it is certainly resistant to the persuasive
paradigm; rather it is indicative of the rhetorical inflection we addressed at the beginning
of this chapter, a rhetorical orientation toward the communicative potential of language rather than the rhetoric of closure. It is “this element, this force” that Stevens implores some “Obscure Satanas” to mold for our benefit, and in its “barbarism” he finds greater potential for the articulation of communal speech:

All his speeches
Are prodigies in longer phrases.
His thoughts begotten at clear sources,
Apparently in air, fall from him
Like chantering from an abundant
Poet, as if he thought gladly, being
Compelled thereto by an innate music. (CP 277)

At this point, however, Stevens must curb his figure through yet another dialectical interrogation of its motives. Although this new barbaric image arose from the ekphrastic desire to set the image speaking, its speech quickly falls into reinforcing the monumentalizing sway of its form rather than offering up its rhetorical significance for others. How quickly thinking the heroic can turn to a kind of uncritical hero-worship is something that Stevens demonstrates clearly in Canto X. The last thing he desires is an image that magnifies and replicates itself “sua voluntate,” gets “Painted by mad-men,” or is generally “seen as magic” (CP 277). His inclination is to dismiss the “profane parade” as empty verbage: “Can we live on dry descriptions, / Feel everything starving except the belly / And nourish ourselves on crumbs of whimsy?” (278). The question is somewhat disingenuous, for Stevens had to have foreseen the much direr consequences of the kind of hero-worship he was describing. What it does, however, is underscore the need to posit a description grounded in values other than the desires of the “belly” which were then threatening to consume the entire world.
Stevens’ answer in “Examination” is to revoke the image for some more responsive figure of “feeling.” Stevens’ poetic at its most rhetorical tends to take on the guise of the more stringent iconoclasm associated with some examples of ekphrasis, as I have suggested in my citation of Lessing as an obvious influence, and these moments are relatively easy to locate because of their unveiled antipathy toward the image. But Stevens also knows that he cannot totally rid his poetic speech of its figures, though his search for a supreme fiction at times paradoxically resembles the total disillusionment of the fiction. If neither “an image, an outline, / A design, [nor] a marble soiled by pigeons” can embody the value Stevens seeks without subjecting it to reductive interests or persuasive cant, then the hero must be

a feeling, a man seen  
As if the eye was an emotion,  
As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
In the object seen and saved that mystic  
Against the sight, the penetrating  
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,  
We have and are the man, capable  
Of his brave quickenings, the human  
Accelerations that seem inhuman. (CP 279)

For the iconoclast, such a declaration seems a complete disavowal of one’s principles. The litany of “eye,” “seeing,” “seen,” and “sight,” all but demonstrate that he has returned to imagist poetry and the emotion presented in an instant of time is merely a reified concept rather than a significant value. Such are appearances until we analyze the manner in which Stevens presents his visualized emotion. The entire proposition is couched in a highly qualified assertion that actually refuses, grammatically, to be divested of its hypothetical character. The “as ifs” work to deny us the possibility of theoretical security from the beginning and to place us “squarely” on rhetorical ground.
Furthermore, the language is exceedingly cagey with its tenses and makes it virtually impossible to locate a fixed instant. The absolute masterful declension from “seeing” to “saw” to “seen” reinforces the elaborate lengths to which Stevens turns his language upon itself, as if he were seeking to set free an alternative “mystic” speech that preexists and persists in hearing and seeing just below sight and its reification. Also, the anti-allegorical supposition that “We have and are the man,” though technically stated in the present tense, retains the echo of the earlier hypothetical, so that what is claimed by this speech is not so much the freezing of time into a moment of possession and occupation, but the disruption of time’s cessation and the “capable” orientation toward the future, which is nothing short of sharing in the hero’s action. We might argue that instead of adopting imagist aesthetics, Stevens revises them by meeting them on their own rhetorical ground and subjecting them to a communal interrogation. The rhetoric of sight is appropriated at this moment not as a resurrection of imagist aesthetics but as a demonstration that visual signs are only conventionally opposed to verbal signs and are therefore open to reappraisal. What Stevens wants to achieve is not the outright destruction of all visual images, but the revaluation of all signs as conventionally determined and, therefore, open to the emotional negotiation that is a communal rhetoric.

The statue only makes a brief appearance in Stevens’ “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” though the kind of rhetorical development I have just noted in “Examination” should be understood as subtending the entire work, which seeks the preliminary motivation of our desire for a supreme fiction while declining to fully convey the supreme fiction through its figures. Nevertheless, I will restrict myself to a brief analysis of Canto III of the second section, in which “The great statue of the General Du Puy”
takes center stage. “Notes” II.iii eschews the rhetorical convolution of “Examination” to make a fairly familiar assessment of the statue, here a monumental image that, in a rehearsing of the language of “Owl’s Clover,” “was rubbish in the end” (CP 392). Like the marbles, which were also the “epitaphs,” of Xenophon in “Examination,” the statue of General Du Puy is indicative of death:

The great statue of the General Du Puy
Rested immobile, though neighboring catafalques
Bore off the residents of its noble Place.

The right, uplifted foreleg of the horse
Suggested that, at the final funeral,
The music halted and the horse stood still. (CP 391)

Although a fictional statue, one can easily substitute in place of General Du Puy any number of cold civic depictions that were unwittingly made to serve as ironic memorials to the dead and dying during World War II. But the true mourning here is not for these dead, for whom the statue serves little purpose and whom it can only be made to represent through a drastic irony, but for the death of its civic ideal, the civitas itself. To its citizens, the statue is purely dead and incapable of inciting those “quickenings” and “accelerations” of the human potential for communication. Even the weekly appreciations of the set piece by the lawyers and doctors of the Place increase the statue’s mortific qualities, raising it up not to an ideal but to a “strongly-heightened effigy” (CP 391). Ravaged by war and loss, these people can only discern in the statue’s form a “study [of] the past” or “a suspension, a permanence, so rigid / That it made the General a bit absurd” (CP 391). In this poem, Stevens reinforces the need for a communal rhetoric to enliven these dead forms by imagining a memorial service not only for the civic ideals that bind people into communities but also for the artistic faculty itself and the demise to
which it dooms itself when it surrenders its communicative potential to pursue an
aesthetics of autonomy. Stevens fears this decline as a foregone conclusion, as is
discernible from the past perfect tense of the poem. He had already begun to hear that art
“belonged / Among our more vestigial states of mind” from critics and artists alike in the
political challenge of the 1930s. Now that he had to face up to the imminent possibility of
destruction in the form of another world war, Stevens feared facing the reality of a world
in which “Nothing had happened because nothing had changed” (CP 392). As a warning,
this single instance of the statue figure in Stevens’ masterwork serves as a motivation for
the discovery of a rhetorical poetics, one that could stage the necessary rhetorical
intervention and discover the possibility for future action in the vestiges of imaginative
figuration.

I think the rhetorical poetics manifested in “Examination,” “Notes,” and the other
shorter poems dealing with Stevens’ “major” themes find their shrewdest articulation in
the later poem “Description without Place” (1945). In it Stevens describes a poetry that
composes sight “A little different from reality: / The difference that we make in what we
see // And our memorials of that difference” (CP 344). The intensely complex play on the
word “seeming” throughout this poem attempts to realize the kind of rhetorical
significance Stevens’ sought in his poetry. Not only does the repeated ‘seem/ing’
incorporate the word ‘see’ to suggest a sight which is only apparently itself but in being
“indifferent to the eye” is truly otherwise than itself and retains this trace of difference
(CP 343). It also attempts to bring together the concepts of reality and the hypothetical—
‘is’ and ‘as (if)’—in a manner similar to what we observed in “Examination.” The
opening lines of the poem immediately present us with this complex flickering of
significance: “It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is” (CP 339). In the language of Levinas, this is a way of saying that truth (our conception of reality) and the image (the figures we employ to represent reality to ourselves) are simultaneous even as we disperse that simultaneity through the process of reflection. This also sets into motion the audible play on ‘seeming’ and ‘seme-ing,’ which oscillates between the dissimulation of meaning in mere appearance and signification. The poetry placed between these two figures, within the ‘seaming’ of the real and the possible, which is not a place but the articulation of difference, is the communal rhetoric Stevens seeks. From it one can imagine a future community, which is not formally constituted as a designated place, but rhetorically imagined as a shared desire: “The future is description without place, / The categorical predicate, the arc” (CP 344). Stevens comes to the hopeful conclusion,

Thus the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lisping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

As, men make themselves their speech… (CP 345)

This passage fully acknowledges that humanity makes the world over in the image of its own descriptive speech and that human life is rhetorical “to the end of it,” but it derives from this not a mystical transcendence, nor an apocalyptic conflagration of all values. The ultimate immateriality of description is, paradoxically, what “matters most” and guides human action in reality. After all, it is only as those who live together in sharing the world that “men make themselves their speech.”
By 1949, when Stevens composed “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” he had turned yet another corner in his aesthetic development, which marked the last phase of his career. Stevens continued to develop his rhetorical poetics to include what he calls above “the theory of description” until the end of his career, but this last phase is marked by a turn away from the imagination and back toward the reality that both precedes and outlives the human mind. As such, this poetry is considerably sparser in its language and humbler in its claims for the imagination. But it would be wrong to assume from this that this last phase designates a turn away from rhetoric, as a look at “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” (1954), the last poem included in the Collected Poems, reveals. The “realism” of the last poems, especially those included in “The Rock,” is a return to the world with a fully internalized rhetorical understanding of the world. The subject of this poem, a waking man, hears “a scrawny cry [of a bird] from outside / [Which s]eemed like a sound in his mind‖ (CP 534). From this cry in his mind, a “chorister […] of the colossal sun,” he derives the “knowledge” of spring even as the world outside still exhibits “the earliest ending of winter” (CP 534). Though the title of the poem promises the thing itself, this reality is actually shown to be quite tenuous because of its conditional grounding: “It [the bird, the sun, spring’s bloom] would have been outside.” Nevertheless, the man derives from this rhetorical play of possibilities something “like / A new knowledge of reality” (CP 534). Though the man’s relation to the world cannot be granted the truth of realism, it no less exhibits the force of realism in his rhetorical connection to it and through this relation he is able to imagine a world that
will exceed the individual and sustain a community to come: “it was / A chorister whose
c preceded the choir” (CP 534).

Because Stevens directs his descriptive eye almost exclusively to reality in this last phase, the aesthetic figure of the statue, which before had served the mediatory role of demonstrating through a rhetorical examination of aesthetic formalism reality’s equally rhetorical constitution, all but disappears. There are two key moments in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” that evoke the statue, the first a rehearsal of its lessons through absence and a second that performs a final farewell to the statue. Canto XIX describes coming upon a public space during an evening walk, a characteristic motif that Stevens first depicted in “The Old Woman and the Statue” in order to occasion a meditation on the conflicting roles of the imagination in the public and private domains. This repetition, however, repeats the scene without the mediating figure of a statue:

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.

That which was public green turned private gray.
At another time, the radial aspect came
From a different source. (CP 478-79)

The different source was presumably the statue of winged steeds, from which the artist had hoped to manufacture a resolution in the war between mind and sky. On this walk, Stevens gestures at the possibility of discovering a radial aspect that could harmonize public and private desires through a kind of anti-figure, the moon, which stands in passive opposition to Stevens’ figure of figures, the sun. Although he intimates forging this radial aspect directly from nature, without the intermediary of an aesthetic form,
Stevens still in this instance insists on the inevitable pathetic re-inscription of reality in order to imagine a world hospitable to human action:

But there was always one [a source]:

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. (CP 479)

The absence of a static form like the statue is both humanity’s crisis of loss and also the condition of its rhetorical triumph. It must establish its own human image in the place left vacant by its outworn forms in order finally not to colonize the world, but lend it the civilities of coexistence without which community is unimaginable. A possible figure to come, Stevens’ intimates, might be “like Ecclesiast,” the Preacher of all times, who “Rugged and luminous, chants in the dark / A text that is an answer, although obscure” (CP 479). Fittingly, this image is not revelatory except to the extent that it characterizes the truth not as a final form but as a rhetorical text, “obscure” and all but illegible.

Stevens finally says farewell to the idea of the statue in Canto XXIV through a metaphoric obliteration: “It was / In the genius of summer that they blew up // The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds” (CP 482). The classical nature of the statue is a thin veil for the obvious reference to the nuclear devastation that occasioned V-J Day and loomed ominously over the world’s nations in the Cold War era. But it also encapsulates the conclusion, which Stevens had long held and which was only corroborated by the inhuman violence of World War II, that a viable ethics could no longer be sustained on religious or political grounds alone. Stevens had long considered the problem of belief
“in the absence of a belief in God” and sought to examine poetry’s role in filling that void. In his “Adagia,” for example, Stevens wrote, “The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give” (OP 186). It was this attentiveness to the valuation of life, which art could help negotiate in the absence of firmly held religious beliefs, that led Stevens into his rhetorical poetics and this attitude continued to direct his efforts in the changed post-World War II secular world. The “genius” of this destruction is not to be discovered in its violent loss. Despite his notable skepticism and frequent antipathy toward Christianity, especially in many early poems of Harmonium, Stevens’ poetry displays a great deal of nostalgic longing for the Christian ethos and a mournful attitude toward its loss. The above reference to Ecclesiast only provides a minor example. The genius lies rather in the recovery of a human capacity for openness to others that this loss precipitated:

   It took all day to quieten the sky
   And then to refill its emptiness again,

   So that at the edge of afternoon…
   ........................................................................................................

   There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,
   An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised.

   (CP 482-83, emphasis added)

Stevens sought to make of the incredible losses of the first half of the twentieth century, through the example of his rhetorical engagement with the world, a conciliating triumph for humanity. From the legacy of its destructive violence he hoped to derive the possibility of human action premised not on dominance and control but on the
recognition and hailing of the other in the hand raised. He imagines a will directed not
toward its own self-realization but toward the capacity of living with others:

There was a willingness not yet composed,
A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and self, that touched them both at once
And alike… (CP 483)

A relation to the world of this order could no longer be monumentally composed and so
Stevens turned aside from the statue to other figures that would be open to rhetorical
negotiation and could effect not only a change in self but in the world which many selves
shared.

In this chapter I have attempted to describe both the motivations for a rhetorical
poetics and its practice in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Furthermore, in stressing the
communicative orientation of Stevens’ poetics, I have sought to demonstrate the thesis
that the turn to rhetoric in the mid-twentieth century is necessarily ethical in motivation.
To illustrate these points I have chosen to focus on Stevens’ use of the statue as a
rhetorical figure both because it evokes the tradition of ekphrasis, which when
understood as a practice of rhetorical negotiation signifies the relation of one art with its
other, and because it thereby allows Stevens to stage an intervention into the tradition of
Western aesthetics to demonstrate the rhetorical underpinnings of formalist practices.
Through his strategic and elastic use of this figure throughout his career, Stevens learned
to convey how human action can be conceived as rhetorical negotiation rather than the
static practice of various formalisms, whether they be aesthetically or politically defined.
In this, Stevens served as an example for other late modernist poets in constructing a
viable rhetoric that could be turned to ethical ends. Through the next three chapters I will
demonstrate how Auden, Jarrell, and Bishop each took precedence from Stevens in taking
up a rhetorical poetry that was in part offered as an ethical corrective to the aesthetics of
formal autonomy espoused by their Romantic and early modernist predecessors.
Likewise, I will continue my emphasis on the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis, which each
of these poets took up in diverse ways as a means of rhetorically engaging otherness.
If the study of the contentious period known by many as late modernism is so accommodating to critical endeavors of various kinds, that is also part of the challenge for any critic of the period. That point where modernism and postmodernism converge or contend for critical dominance lies upon a deep rift, a faultline that is like the very figure of criticism (*krinein*), the decisive cut that distinguishes and delineates knowledge. The seemingly interminable distinctions fostered by such definitive rifts lead to a general stagnation in decisive knowledge, to a state Tobin Siebers describes by asserting that “criticism robbed of its differentiating talent falls into crisis” (Siebers 15). The study of this faultline, whether through the historical trauma of World War II or through the literary trauma of modernism’s demise, therefore requires a double-edged criticism, one involving a response to the very crisis of criticism and an attempt to restore the grounds for decision. The solution may lie in perceiving unanimity even where many are loathe to claim it. Despite the often glaring polemical opposition of modernists and postmodernists, a fundamental change takes place during this period of literary history that both schools of criticism tend to recognize. Any discussion of the post-modern in literature depends on the narrative of a break with and in response to modernism, on our ability to speak of something that is “other” to modernism in fundamental ways. Similarly, discussions of “late,” “low,” or “contemporary” modernism rely on narratives of fundamental change, decline, and loss, if one that is reckoned as less abrupt. Most notable is the notion that modernism extended its literary reign well into the second half of the twentieth century through a no less radical process of self-immolation whereby
modernism became “other” to itself. Given either approach, the study of late modernism has yielded a veritable consensus on the idea that mid- and late-twentieth century literature exacts a fundamental accountability to otherness and the exploration of what may have previously been considered liminal or marginal.

It is for that reason that my examination of the ethics of late modernist American poetry truly comes into its own via a detour that takes us through the poetry of British expatriate W. H. Auden. In a superficial sense, this approach revisits the debate on the question “Just how American is the so-called ‘American Auden’?”—a question that has only become increasingly divisive over the last few decades. With the designation of an “English Auden,” it became typical to think of 1939 as the year, coinciding with his emigration to the United States, of Auden’s metamorphosis. But the so-called change is not nearly so demarcated. Auden’s application for American citizenship, begun in the year 1940, was finally accepted in 1946, already a year after his service as a major on the Morale Division of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey’s (USSBS) expedition to German towns devastated by mass allied bombing. Generally, readers have agreed that the 1940s marked a time of intense remaking in Auden’s life and career, and it is this remaking of himself as a poet that has led some critics to adopt the moniker “American Auden.” But by 1948, Auden would begin to spend increasing amounts of time away from his home in New York, writing increasingly of landscapes and domestic situations that cannot properly be described as “American.” In his seminal biography of the poet, Humphrey Carpenter asserts that Auden’s ideas of citizenship lacked consistency, a fact that only exacerbated his incessant wavering about his own moral duties during the early part of World War II.57 Like the myriad contemporaries who charged Auden with
sedition, treason, and an ill-conceived pacifism because of his flight from England on the eve of world war, Carpenter unwittingly likens Auden to the poet’s representation of the devil in “New Year Letter”:

> He knows the bored will not unmask him
> But that he’s lost if someone ask him
> To come the hell in off the links
> And say exactly what he thinks. (CP 214)

Robert Caserio presents a more sympathetic look at Auden’s doubts about national affiliation, underscoring Auden’s direct challenge to traditional notions of citizenship. Like the mythical Wandering Jew, whom Auden began to conceive as the general type for modern humanity’s spiritual condition, Caserio argues that “[t]he subject and the origin of Auden’s civic voice canonizes not a state of inclusion, but a state of allegiance-on-the-move, a refugeeism, whereby neutral citizenship is both cancelled and reinstated” (Caserio 91). Either way, Auden shares with his devil a preference for a rhetoric of indeterminacy that would keep him from staking or losing all. Ultimately, I agree with Caserio in perceiving Auden as encouraging readers to “see that the dignity of citizenship inheres in a concretely enacted state of being between or among nations, and not in or of one” (91). In other words, it is through a language of relation and not subordination to a nation that responsible community is maintained. Either reading, in part because of the poet’s own refusal to accommodate himself to a particular, nation-bound paradigm of citizenship, problematizes any coherent idea of an “American Auden.”

Furthermore, Auden’s influence on other poets was somewhat eclectic, certainly anomalous among major modernist poets. Already a major literary force by the time of his emigration to the United States, Auden ensconced himself as a formidable figure on the American scene through frequent publications (editorial, critical, and literary).
throughout the forties. It is often said that he enjoyed an almost patristic stature as the progenitor of literary conscience among emergent American poets in the middle part of the century. In 1945, Karl Shapiro writes, “The man whose impress on our rhetoric / Has for a decade dominated verse / In London, Sydney and New York is Auden.”

Elizabeth Bishop recalls Auden’s hold over the younger generation in a late article: “All through the thirties and forties, I and all my friends who were interested in poetry, read him [Auden] constantly. We hurried to see his latest poem or book, and either wrote as much like him as possible, or tried hard not to.” As Bishop’s reminiscence also reveals, however, Auden’s actual influence, despite his status as a major figure throughout the war years, was of a rather dubious kind for many American poets:

His then leftist politics, his ominous landscapes, his intimations of betrayed loves, war on its way, disasters and death, matched exactly the mood of our late-depression and post-depression youth. We admired his apparent toughness, his sexual courage—actually more honest than Ginsberg’s say, is now, while still giving expression to technically dazzling poetry. Even the most hermetic early poems gave us the feeling that here was someone who knew—about psychology, geology, birds, love, the evils of capitalism—what have you? They colored our air and made us feel tough, ready, and in the know, too. (47-48)

The gradual elucidation of the Auden that so impressed Bishop’s youth leads us to the paradox, aptly phrased by Peter Firchow as “the rather odd and anticlimactic conclusion that the American Auden had relatively little impact on the work of the following generation of American poets. Only the English Auden did.” Bishop’s description bears a close likeness to that loving description of Randall Jarrell’s in the first half of the essay “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry,” the same essay that spearheaded the general reaction against and blindness to the later poetry of the “American Auden.”
In other words, it seems that at the height of his powers in America Auden had already become a relic of the past, a figure doomed to be surpassed or forgotten. (That is, unless his later poetry needed future generations to clearly reveal its impact.) The lesson of Auden’s odd positionality and his resistance to classification seems to be that Auden’s literary influence is riddled with a number of critical blindesses, one in particular of which it is the object of this chapter to illuminate. I will argue that the watershed changes in Auden’s poetry that begin roughly contemporaneous with the growing threat of world war and his emigration to the U.S. are largely predicated on a radical change in ethics. This change is distinguished primarily by a break from the entitled moralities of political ideologies (most notably those of fascism, Marxism, and liberalism) and the embrace of a more precarious relation to otherness up to and even including the point of sacrifice for the other. In order to decipher this radical shift in ethics I will have occasional recourse to draw upon theorists of what has been generally defined as “postmodern ethics,” most notably on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, though my purpose is not to draw a one-to-one ratio between the thought of Auden and these later thinkers, nor to put into practice a specific methodology that may be characterized as ethical postmodernism or Levinasian.

Robert Eaglestone, among many, has convincingly warned against the dangers of applying the philosophy of ethical thinkers like Levinas, for it is not rightly a philosophy, but the interruption of philosophy, the saying that lays the grounds for the philosophical said, the “arche-writing” that Derrida claims underwrites language itself. My purpose is rather to demonstrate how Auden’s poetry and the ethics it attempts to perform in response to the historical conditions of the mid-twentieth century share a similar impulse with philosophers like Levinas and Derrida whose philosophical skepticism also grew out
of a fundamental response to mid-century violence, most notably to the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{63}

Furthermore, I argue that this focus on ethics has been neglected because the discourses of modernism and the criticism so precariously built upon them have resisted an ethics conceived as accountability for the other. My ethical intervention into the poetry of late modernism is an attempt to bring modernism more fully into responsible contact with its other.

Although ethics is still rarely broached in late modernist American studies, my approach nonetheless takes precedence from others in this decisive turn toward Auden.\textsuperscript{64} Bonnie Costello has argued that, in the poet’s own elegiac words for Freud, Auden became “a whole climate of opinion” for the generation of American poets that began to come into their own in the 1930s. For many of this generation, Auden represented the critical link between the high modernists, who had failed to grasp poetry’s connection to the changing conditions of historical reality, and themselves, who had come to “see and experience the world of the thirties through the language Auden invented” (Costello, Whole 22). This unique language challenged American poets to embrace rhetorical alternatives to the impasses of modernism and to imagine “what contemporary poetry might look like” (Whole 19). Likewise, Charles Altieri has recently warned that critics of American modernist poetry may have to accept their limits in understanding what became of modernism unless they seek out alternative histories of influence. Challenging the longstanding divide established by colleague Marjorie Perloff in “Pound/Stevens: whose era?,” Altieri suggests that not Pound or Stevens, but Auden, more than any other poet, “played a central role in showing American poets how they might develop rhetorical stances that can finesse imaginary identifications” (147). These critics’ willingness to
push against the limits of the “American” canon and to challenge entrenched scholarly
notions of inclusion and influence demonstrates this growing attempt to accommodate
otherness in the study of modernist literature. One of the hallmarks of this intervention is
the resurrection of rhetoric, the nefarious “other” of naturalized modernist discourse.

1.

Auden and rhetoric have long been coupled in the critical mind for obvious
reasons. Some of Auden’s earliest works reveal an acute awareness of rhetorical
situation, as witnessed by titles like “1929” or The Orators: an English Study (1932)
which place emphasis on the moment or the place of production. Even an early poem like
“The Watershed” (1927), which so obviously relies on typical Eliotic modernist tropes
such as psychological alienation and spiritual bankruptcy, tends to belie its dramatic
scene with a heightened sense of rhetorical urgency. The syntactic disorientation of the
memorable opening lines not only displays pretensions to a high level of modernist
difficulty, but also disrupts the reader’s easy identification with either the speaker or the
situation, thereby underscoring a pervasive rhetorical anxiety:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
On the wet road between the chafing grass
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
Snatches of tramline running to a wood… 65

The landscape assaults the reader because of its strangeness, yet it feels oddly nostalgic.
Together, the personification of the grass and the tramline and the odd passivity attributed
to the crux and the washing floors—which have been “left” (positioned or abandoned)
and “dismantled” by an unclear agent—disturb our notions of agency. Yet the
strategically placed definite articles taunt readers with an as-of-yet-unfounded sense of
familiarity. One has never approached this particular watershed, seen this road, or felt the chafing of this grass. But, then again, it is not all that different from the scenario par excellence of the poeticized yet devastated modern landscape: Eliot’s waste land.

As part of its technique, “The Watershed” places readers in an unstable position, thrown between uneasy accession to the conventional modernist and (anti-)heroic condition (represented by the potentially deceptive “him”) and a state of suspension drawn into perpetual question (“Who”?). The opening of the second verse stanza accentuates this rhetorical indecision:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
Be no accessory content to no one
Aimless for faces rather there than here. (CP 33)

Again the rhythm is consistently disrupted and the strains against grammatical coherence challenge the reader’s credulity, but the poem’s rhetorical imposition on the reader has increased. The unstable challenge to identity has now been leveled at “you.” This move toward a more intimate rhetorical address and a coherent idea of audience coincides with the paradoxical demands of the imperative voice and leaves one further mired between there and here, action and impotence, return and regression. As Altieri has said, Auden’s English poems often “put the mind in situations eliciting various kinds and degrees of discomfort with the frameworks available for explanations” (149). “The Watershed” is an early example of how Auden would cultivate the rhetorical capacities of his poetry in order to navigate his uneasiness with existing modernist paradigms.

By the time of Auden’s own poetic watershed his turn toward a more rhetorical poetry had become obvious. Another Time (1940), the volume that most clearly
announced the arrival of a new Auden, was tellingly divided into three parts: “People and Places,” “Lighter Poems,” and “Occasional Poems.” Each section’s title reflects a distinct facet of his rhetorical development. “People and Places,” as a group of poems, attests to a more civic-minded poet. The poems quite often oscillate between meditations on the current state of political affairs in Europe as experienced through concrete geographical (e.g., “Oxford,” “Brussels in Winter,” and “Dover”) or allegorical locations (e.g., “The Capital,” “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and “As I Walked Out One Evening”) and reflections on the past and tradition as embodied by representative figures of the near and more distant past (e.g., “A. E. Housman,” “Edward Lear,” “Rimbaud,” “Herman Melville,” “Pascal,” “Voltaire at Ferney,” “Matthew Arnold”). “Lighter Poems”—a scathingly ironic title given the poems’ collective preoccupation with such dark themes as deceit, death, murder, biological warfare, and refugeeism—attempts to wed serious historical reflection with the conventions of light verse, and in doing so makes the implicit claim that Auden maintains strong ties “to a civil tradition derived from Chaucer and Pope” (Costello, Whole 19). As editor of The Oxford Book of Light Verse (1938), Auden hinted at his allegiance to this tradition over the meditative tradition stemming from the Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets to the Romantics and Symbolists that was so often favored by the early modernists. At the conclusion of the introduction, Auden makes a surprisingly unequivocal civic claim for the peculiar mix of serio-comic versification he later parodies in Another Time: “For poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free” (P1 436). The “Lighter Poems”—written amidst societies featuring increasingly atomized masses that were descending into seemingly interminable conflict, “Each sequestered in its hate,” to
borrow a familiar phrase—certainly give the lie to Auden’s confident claim (see CP 248). But this effrontery nevertheless commands acknowledgement of poetry’s public function from familiar readers. The final section, “Occasional Poems,” most clearly presents the poet as a public figure and the poems collected here, with their investment in historical detail and the public rituals of mourning and celebration, parting and wedding, distinguish Auden from a great number of his modernist predecessors, with perhaps the major exception of W. B. Yeats, whose poems like “Easter, 1916” and “Parnell’s Funeral” Auden was deliberately mimicking in his own occasional poems such as “September 1, 1939” or “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.”

The conspicuous rhetorical cues of Another Time notwithstanding, Auden’s turn to rhetoric should not simply be mistaken for an unmediated embrace of a rival Anglophone poetic tradition. Although a peculiar rhetorical anxiety informs the greater portion of Auden’s inheritance from his high modernist predecessors, it is his distinct willingness to submit his poetry to a rhetorically embattled struggle with modernism that displays his commitment to the articulation of an ethical language in his poetry. In Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry, Mutlu Konuk Blasing observes that ‘postmodern’ poetry “marks a historical and a poetic difference” (3). The poetic difference, as she perceives it, resides in the modernist practice of naturalizing and suppressing rhetoric by disassociating its two primary functions, figuration and persuasion, “so as to keep figuration (imagination) uncontaminated by persuasion (will)” (Politics 5). The case she makes is at its strongest in her reading of Pound, whose theory of the image she reads as a naturalization of metaphor and the attribution of “truth” to linguistic technique. ‘Postmodern’ poetry, on the other hand, “regard[s] any link between
empirical, historical, or natural experience and transcendent truth...as only rhetorical and therefore political” (*Politics* 10). As a general theory, Blasing has effectively cleared the ground for a return to rhetorical analysis in mid-twentieth century poetry, though I disagree that such analysis depends on identifying or reifying a postmodern poetics. One certainly feels wary of accepting her definition of the ‘postmodern’ as “any poetic practice that questions modernist assumptions” (*Politics* 3), or her enticing but even less rigorously reflexive argumentation about the political ramifications of a rhetorical study of mid-twentieth century poetry:

That is, the more nonutilitarian and special poetic language sounds, the more it represents itself as convention-bound and emphasizes its own figuration, the more it fulfills its unique and generic, inherently critical political function. And poetry that either represses the conventions that go into its construction, or claims to be nonrhetorical and natural and to reveal truths of any stripe, is implicitly totalitarian, for it leaves the reader no room to evaluate its rhetoric, since to perceive its rhetoric would be to cancel it out as poetry, on its own terms. (*Politics* 19)

Though Blasing’s claims in many ways run parallel to my own readings of the poetry, her method tends to suppress its own historicist impulse by conflating poetic classifications with monolithic political worldviews. Furthermore, identifying two seemingly simultaneous and opposed poetic traditions, Blasing may reify unhelpful binaries that effectively suppress those points of contact or contention that provoked the occasion of rhetoric in the first place. I fear that, by suppressing those rhetorical claims on our attention, those reaches of inquiry that approach otherness, Blasing may be colluding in the censure of those ethical imperatives that give rise to the fundamental split between modernism and postmodernism and register themselves as crisis in language.

Of course Auden lends himself, at least superficially, to the implicit polemics of opposed traditions (postmodernism versus modernism or other such binaries) in works
such as “Letter to Lord Byron” (1936), Another Time (1940), and The Double Man [New Year Letter] (1941), in which he deploys a ribald wit ostensibly to repudiate the Romantic/Modernist tradition. But in point of fact much of Auden’s mid-career poetics picks up on and develops a discourse central to modernism: how to reconcile the representational with the rhetorical. For Altieri, modernism is fundamentally a realist aesthetic developed in response to Romantic ideals of art, and therefore primarily concerned with its methods of representation. It is certainly true that modernists, as well as any other poets who devise or improvise their own technique of representation, among whom the Romantics should surely be counted as among the experimental and revolutionary, confront a tradition of representation that is bilinear. One aspect of representation deals with the figural and is usually subsumed under the category of the pictorial, according to which the realistic text “holds a verbal picture up to the world and tests its adequacy”; while the other deals with persuasion and is often counted under the category of the political, where “successful representation is a matter of managing identifications with the interests of a given constituency” (Altieri 126). Under Blasing’s assessment, modernists attached great value to the former aspect of representation but were suspicious of the latter because it thwarted the realist drive for accuracy and truth by allowing for the imposition of interest and will. No doubt modernists were justified in their initial desire to short-circuit this persuasive element of representation.

The cultivation of a stylized impersonality in order to remove as much as possible the distorting effects of the will, as much as they are expressed through personal impressions or emotions, and secure for the aesthetic work a primacy that aspires to the condition of scientific truth can be viewed as a reiteration of the Platonic gesture in The
Republic. Socrates banishes poets from his ideal society because they promote imitation, which by its secondary relation to truth promotes chaos rather than order in the republic. Modernism’s initial rejection of the persuasive essentially banishes politics from poetry in order to preserve the restorative quality of the aesthetic work from the deception of interest politics. Modernists wished to restore to art a representational honesty that they could not find in the realm of politics. But like any banishment or violent suppression as a means to secure uncontested dominance or “truth” results in the return of skepticism (recall that Socrates rescinds his banishment at the end of the dialogue and commissions a song), the suppression of persuasive representation merely became the grounds for a more covert ideological control in the name of honesty. As if misspeaking on behalf of his discursive subjects, Altieri writes, “issues of rhetoricity plague efforts to establish a stable and effective realism” (126). On the contrary, rhetoric, taken as the privileging of the representational function and the facilitation of identification rather than a distortion masquerading as fact or truth, became not a “plague” but a value to later modernists who found impersonalism no longer capable of solving the problems of representation. Auden, therefore, shows himself as determinedly engaged in questions central to modernism. Unlike some misleading claims that he really belongs to a different tradition and therefore effectively sidesteps the problems of modernism, the contention here is that he does not simply add rhetoric where before there was none, but that even as he inherits the modernist skepticism toward persuasion he restores it to the realm of rhetoric as the necessary other half of figuration. It is this uneasy return to a fuller rhetorical register that actually lays the foundation for the radical ethical upheaval in late modernist poetry: “Rather than use rhetoric to persuade, they
would use rhetoric to establish identifications with what it feels like to construct possibilities for changes of heart” (Altieri 128).

The value of this position is that it clarifies a number of curious remarks regarding the return to rhetoric in late modernist poetry. In *Aude\’s Apologies for Poetry*, Lucy MacDiarmid makes the seemingly contradictory claim that as Auden emerged as the most adept modern master of rhetorical form through his “creative revisions of medieval and Renaissance genres and topoi,” the public role of poetry became weaker for him. The trajectory of this “hidden poetics,” as MacDiarmid terms it, “is less a disempowering of literature than a dissociating of it from a responsive audience” (161). The characteristic picture we take away is of an Auden in flux who, experimenting with his newly adopted audience in the U.S., initially adopts a rhetorical speech arrayed in the vestures of public office but then gradually disrobes, through an extensive retraction of poetry’s claims to civic midwifery—“Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society” (*CP* 201)—to explore what might be called a speech of exposure, revealing those forms of life within which the individual lives and upon which society is built. Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman has drawn attention away from poetry’s powers of action and toward its powers of revelation:

> At one level, of course, poetry has no bearing on cultural critique. It cannot confirm or disconfirm specific remedies concerning social and political reorganization that may be drawn from theories about our imperfect transition from feudal and rural conditions to an industrial society. It may take sides, of course, through passionate impersonation; what it does most convincingly, however, with its famous “concreteness” or illustrative energy, is to provide counterexamples to disembodied thought and unearned abstraction. (61)

Or, more recently, Stephen Burt, adopting the classifications of physicists, has argued that perhaps it now behooves critics to take greater interest in the “weak” notion that
modern poems can often speak to public concerns rather than the “strong principle” that a poem’s value is a factor of its ability to be engaged in public affairs and speak to a defined public audience (September 550). Taking inspiration from these readers then, it may be appropriate to explore how modern poems speak to public concerns and, in particular, how Auden’s poems begin to employ a doubled rhetorical force in their saying and unsaying. Addressing this question, I contend, is how we may begin to understand the deeply ethical investment of late modernist poetry as it came to redefine its relation to the public realm in response to historical crisis.70

2.

To demonstrate how Auden’s return to rhetoric is not merely a shift from one tradition of figuration toward another of persuasion but a twofold rhetorical force of articulation and disarticulation, I would like now to turn to poems from Another Time that most clearly trace this development. Even though these poems arise out of a tightly confined period, I deliberately avoid treating them in chronological order so as to illuminate the incredible flux Auden’s stylistics underwent at this time and to emphasize the spirit of urgent experimentalism manifested in these poems in search of an ethically grounded rhetoric. I therefore begin with the most compelling failure of these poems, “September 1, 1939.” This poem occupies a curious position in Auden reception largely as a result of its rhetorical problems. As John Boly argues, “September 1, 1939” was “the beneficiary of a historical accident” that tended to solidify in the minds of many readers the reputation Auden and his circle cultivated throughout the thirties as a generation of engaged leftist modern poets (175). Since the German invasion of Poland did ultimately
lead to the dreaded total war, Auden’s timely and frank response in this poem served as definitive proof of Auden’s historical clairvoyance for many of his admirers. This carefully defended narrative of reception also played a noticeable role in the poem’s revival in popularity after the devastating events of September 11, 2001. But the poem has equally made an impression on readers because of its conspicuous absence from Auden’s collected poems. Auden’s discomfort with the poem’s expressed politics and call for solidarity led him eventually to exclude it from his collected work, which justifies our viewing the poem as a decisive moment in Auden’s movement toward a gradual rejection of poetic affirmations of political ideology and a reconsideration of the role poetry adopts as a decisive social force. Decades later, in the prologue to The Dyer’s Hand (1962), Auden writes, “In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate. ‘The unacknowledged legislators of the world’ describes the secret police, not the poets” (DH 27). Resentment over poetry’s complicity with the violence of state apparatuses reveals itself in the “euphoric dream” that the poem’s persona spurns before the face of reality’s indictment: “Out of the mirror they stare, / Imperialism’s face / And the international wrong” (AT 99). Yet, paradoxically, Auden upholds this very complicity in a later essay:

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy, and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars. (DH 85)

The contradiction in these readings, it seems, stems from the unquestioned subordination of the social function poetry might serve to the ideal illusion of an autonomous medium.
But poetry as literature, to a greater degree than the plastic arts, shares its medium, language or—as put into practice—rhetoric, with the ideological apparatuses of state control (law, education, religion, punditry, media of all forms). Being that poetry can either be appropriated to serve or put at a remove to challenge the ideological interests of the state, it therefore occupies a critically ambivalent position, and any poet such as Auden who aspires to use poetry to ‘disenchant’ has to remain vigilant of the very traditions (canons of invention, topoi, generic conventions) he deploys and the ultimate ends to which his words are directed.

“This September 1, 1939” fails on some level as poetry, or at least Auden thought so later in life, by failing to take full account of poetry’s necessary relation to rhetoric, purporting to transparency without disclosing its own rhetoricity. Though Auden, notorious for red herrings or half-truths in justifying his editorial decisions, never gave a clear reason for excising “September 1, 1939” from his collected poems, we may guess that in calling it inexcusable to profess an idea “simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective” he is at least partially tipping his hand (CP xxvi). The poem was so “effective” rhetorically as not to take full interest in its own rhetoricity. Perhaps one of the most telling signs of this phenomenon is its use of a deceptively straightforward persona, who speaks in the first person directly of his own experience: “I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street / Uncertain and afraid…” (AT 98). Obviously the use of first person does not preclude a poem from engaging in self-critical rhetoric—though one may note Auden’s modernist bias against this form of address in his other occasional poems from this same period, which choose any form of address (third, second, first person plural) but the first person singular—but it does hark back to the privileged voice
Indeed, Auden’s speaker, though he may not make the most jovial drinking buddy, wears the trappings of one suited to break with the Romantic tradition. He begins from a provisionary doubt of authority and conventional intelligence ("Uncertain and afraid / As the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade"), displaying an ingratiating humility about his own competence ("I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn…"), and taking responsibility for his own culpability ("The windiest militant trash / Important Persons shout / Is not so crude as our wish" [AT 99-100]). Still, these trappings point not to an underlying personality open to the otherness of experience, but to a poetical discourse that would impose itself by way of the same logic it would repudiate. One of the poem’s most vulnerable stanzas is also its most covertly authoritarian:

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
“I will be true to the wife,
I’ll concentrate more on my work,”
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf.
Who can speak for the dumb? (AT 100)

The inclusion of this inward prayer seems to be the persona’s badge of authenticity, the sign of his participation in a communal or ethical vow to act for the betterment of others amid the uncertainties of human daily life. But, on the level of form, it is really his assertion of power or superiority over the others he calls “dense commuters,” whom he
possibly has a hand in deluding and moving against their wills by determining what vows they can say and what life-narratives they may pursue. This apparently sincere vow is not a moment of shared speech but rather part of his intricately enacted argument against the human capacity to act other than in one’s own interest:

    Accurate scholarship can
    Unearth the whole offence
    From Luther until now
    That has driven a culture mad… (AT 98)

    All the conventions conspire
    To make this fort assume
    The furniture of home;
    Lest we should see where we are,
    Lost in a haunted wood,
    Children afraid of the night
    Who have never been happy or good… (AT 99)

    For the error bred in the bone
    Of each woman and each man
    Craves what it cannot have,
    Not universal love
    But to be loved alone. (AT 100)

By transforming what before had been speculation and warning into grounds for personifying his audience, the persona deposes the possibility of shared action. He attempts to secure the dominance of his vision against all. Auden was said to have used punctuation inappropriately throughout his career. The last lines of the seventh stanza, in which he wavers uncertainly between declarative and interrogative, show as much, though possibly in this case to the advantage of disclosing the persona’s questionable motives toward his audience. In effect, he reveals that the question is insincere. In this poem’s discourse, the persona already speaks for the “dense commuters” and the “helpless governors”: he is “[w]ho can speak for the dumb[.]”
The final stanzas are a rhetorical tour de force and probably most responsible for the common but somewhat unfounded aura of optimism that surrounds this poem in most readers’ minds. One finds the ending of the poem difficult to resist, even if the persona’s demagoguery and self-importance have become apparent to the more perceptive readers, which may be the most telling reason why Auden distrusted the poem. Memorably, the penultimate stanza begins:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky… (AT 100)

This voice sounds so much like the Auden we have come to know as the civic bard rebelling against the Romantic lyric tradition and its cultural progeny (folkish nationalism, Nazism) that it is tempting to mistake this for an authentic representation of Auden the man. But in fact the “romantic lie” the persona would undo is another version of the lie that sustains the coherence of his own argument, just as his humble submission that all he has is a voice (one among others, one presumes) is clearly false as he has already ventriloquized and mocked the voice of the masses for whom he speaks, revealing his first person rhetorical position (the fiction of “a voice”) as a dissimulation for his own controlling or authoritarian devices. That Auden wished to distance himself from this poem, finding it all too rhetorical, speaks the more clearly for the lesson of this discursive dissimulation: rhetorical subjectivity is much more than an individual position adopted for the sake of communicative ease, but a collusion of several historical and ideological forces that must be examined. The voice betrays this when it moves from assurance to a series of imperatives:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die. (AT 100)

While all of these commands may need reckoning with, and some may even serve as admirable principles from which to construct a responsible politics, they are voiced from a position of insincerity, or what I would describe as an undisturbed subjectivity.

The final stanza, of course, makes a more compelling case for forsaking one’s self-assurance on behalf of the other. The persona’s supposition that there may indeed be others more or somewhat less like me—“Yet, dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out…” (AT 101)—offers a tenuous hope (if that is not indeed a redundant phrase) that the possibility of community has been restored. The final lines, laboring as they do under another indeterminacy of punctuation, further bolster this tenuousness as a positive value:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show and affirming flame.[/?] (AT 101)

But the effect is rather too little too late, for the persona’s accession to that position of rhetorical power has already vindicated and ensured the continuation of a violent economy: “Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return” (AT 98). Therefore, the poem is a failure in terms of mobilizing its rhetoric for an ethical use not because it offers no ethical insight, but because it fails to discover the ethical within the torsion of its rhetorical moment. The resistance to the persona’s Romantic lie comes not from within the rhetorical agony of the poem itself, but from an extrinsic logic, which we glimpse
most clearly in the intrusion of a different register in the concluding stanza. Thereafter, Auden’s rhetorical intervention in modernist or modern poetry would pursue this question about the relation between ethics and rhetoric at a deeper level.

3.

Auden spent the last months of 1938 prior to his departure for America with Christopher Isherwood in Brussels. During this brief interim between his witnessing firsthand the frontlines of the Sino-Japanese War and the exodus that would radically alter his life, Auden seems to have procured some breathing space for the rather innocuous task of revision and the composition of what might be deemed, with the notable exception of “Musée des Beaux Arts” (discussed hereafter), a few relatively minor poems. But the unassuming air of the poems Auden wrote during this period, many of them sonnets composed on the tails of the In Time of War sequence, is not so unassuming on closer inspection. The relatively unremarked “Brussels in Winter,” for example, opens on a note of philosophical unease:

Wandering the cold streets tangled like old string,
Coming on fountains silent in the frost,
The city still escapes you; it has lost
The qualities that say “I am a Thing.” (AT 17)

This opening quatrain speaks of a loss of coherence in perceiving the world and a corresponding doubt over the extent to which language can represent the world. The pronoun “it,” the thing-imminent, thing-not-yet-thing, is here undecidable, referring as equally to “the city” as to “you,” each percept escaping immediate representation in the poem. Familiarly, this sonnet originates in a moment of rhetorical indecision. The initial
intimacy of the poem, represented by the “I-you” address of the opening quatrain, is threatened by the dialectical move to a wider scope in the second quatrain:

Only the homeless and the really humbled
Seem to be sure exactly where they are,
And in their misery are all assembled;
The winter holds them like the Opera. (AT 17)

The successful yoking of these two quatrains depends upon the strength of the bond between particular and universal introduced via the representative figure of the isolated individual. Much as Auden repudiated inclusive models of community and citizenship for more dynamic or transitional models of refugeeism or relation on the move to better reflect the spiritual wandering of modern humanity, so here he allegorizes atomized society via the homeless individual or the dispossessed. This paradigmatic shift to underscore a shared condition of dispossession may seek identifications rooted in what Kenneth Burke calls consubstantiality, the prerequisite for any form of collective action.73 In A Rhetoric of Motives, Burke writes that “A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (21). From this perspective, Auden’s poetry may be considered among the most perceptive of writing at this time in consistently articulating a vision for shared action in the coming political crises to descend on the Western world.

But such a perspective, I submit, may risk overlooking the characteristic critical edge to Auden’s poetry. The figure of dispossessed humanity in Auden’s poetry is not complacent, though it may resonate strongly with political theories such as Hannah Arendt’s ideas about totalitarianism or Erich Fromm’s notion of an escape from freedom,
and so may lend poetic eloquence to those strains of liberal democratic thinking that attained hegemonic control in the West after World War II, codifying and in many ways productively managing the antagonisms of the Cold War. In fact, though the development of this sonnet from the first quatrain to the second hinges on the efficacy of this representative figure, the concluding sestet problematizes this easy allegorization. The attempted universalization of the opening intimacy via a traversal of the third person collective—“in their misery are all assembled”—does not facilitate a successful return to intimacy and consubstantial grounds for shared action. On the contrary, the closing lines reassert class division and insist on the economic oppression that increases the atomization of society: “Ridges of rich apartments rise to-night / Where isolated windows glow like farms” (AT 17). Furthermore, the intimacy of the opening “I-You” address has been transmogrified into a questionable state of affairs, where the possibility of ethical action on behalf of another is embroiled in the injustices of economic and sexual exploitation. “You” does not return as an interventional possibility, but “the stranger” whose attempt at intimate engagement only approximates illicit solicitation: “And fifty francs will earn the stranger right / To warm the heartless city in his arms.” The poem thus ends estranged from its own rhetorically expressed wishes. This rhetorical anxiety is indicative of Auden’s poetic production at this transitional historical moment as impending world war began to undermine humanity’s means, particularly political means, of discovering a common substantive view of the world, and as the poet began to reassess his commitment to politics and the obligations of poetry in a rapidly dividing world.
Also worth note is this sonnet’s peculiar similarity to another work being composed around this time, Martin Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935-1937/1950). Although there is no record of Auden’s having heard Heidegger’s treatise on the work of art and its particular mode of unconcealment and letting truth be, some of the thematic elements shared by these two works are striking. First, Auden’s anxiety over defining “The qualities that say ‘I am a Thing’” closely resemble much of Heidegger’s opening distinction in “The Origin” between the thingly character of the thing, which exists below our conventional thing-concepts of the “bearer of traits,” the “manifold of sensations,” or even “formed matter” in the thing’s peculiar “self-containment,” and something altogether other than the thing, which is the work of art’s work of unconcealment and setting the truth to work (see Heidegger 20-38). “Brussels in Winter” could be read from a Heideggerian perspective as an essay in attempting to explain how poetry reveals human relations to the thingness of the world. Additionally, Auden’s second line—“Coming on fountains silent in the frost”—may provide a buried allusion to a poem that Heidegger cites in his essay, C. F. Meyer’s poem “Roman Fountain”:

The jet ascends and falling fills
  The marble basin circling round;
This, veiling itself over, spills
Into a second basin’s ground.
The second in such plenty lives,
Its bubbling flood a third invests,
And each at once receives and gives
And streams and rests. (qtd in Heidegger 36)

The mixture of movement and stasis in Auden’s sonnet mimics this earlier example perhaps even to the extent that, like the identification “I am a Thing,” the movement is undone “like old string.” Through this allusion, Auden both corroborates and disputes Heidegger’s conception of the work of art, specifically the following claim: “The work,
therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing’s general essence” (Heidegger 36).

Auden shares with Heidegger the constitutive questions, “what is a thing?” and “what is a work of art?” But as we have already seen, “Brussels in Winter” does not merely un-conceal the fundament of essence or reveal a mode of being; instead, the poem pits one rhetorical register or one representational frame against another, as if being or essence in its proliferation is being unraveled, modified, or drawn into suspension.

Auden’s allusion to Meyer would reveal, then, not only his radical philosophical investment in questions along the lines of Heidegger’s famous disquisition into being, but an engagement in ethical questions along the lines of those articulated by Emmanuel Levinas in his own development of and departure from Heideggerian ontology. These philosophical investments are evident in Auden’s major achievement of 1938, “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

Discussions of this poem’s ekphrastic quality, at least in one sense of the word, abound. The choice of such a grandiloquent title coupled with the poem’s preoccupation with a number of artworks, all of them incidentally by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, fall comfortably within the realm of the literary tradition of explicating the intricacies of a work of art: ek (out) + phrazein (to speak), a speaking or calling out, an elaboration of the medium. Furthermore, the poem clearly arises out of a rhetorical demand to call out suffering by name and offer a definitive account of its function in society via a survey of the work of the Old Masters: “About suffering they were never wrong / The Old Masters: how well they understood / Its human position” (AT 34). But equally notable is “Musée
“Musée des Beaux Arts”’ dramatic stylistic divergence from much of Auden’s earlier poetry, particularly in its deployment of extensive understatement. As Mendelson observes, “Musée des Beaux Arts’ is a poem that pointedly rejects the grand manner of Spain and of the Auden-Isherwood plays—where the crucial agon happened at the ‘heart’ or the summit, at the highest point of a rhetorical flight. The truth was considerably less dramatic” (Early 362). This of course accounts for the ironies of a poem that purports to be about suffering and yet consistently emphasizes how it “run[s] its course / Anyhow in a corner” (AT 34). Mendelson further speculates that this anticlimactic imitation of the Old Masters was Auden’s recognition of Christianity’s inversion of the classical edict “that the most important subjects require the highest style” (Early 363). Beyond the possible religious argument underlying such stylistic deviations, I perceive in the poem’s use of rhetorical devices antagonistic to the ostensive purpose of poetic discourse evidence of the maturing ethical sensibility of Auden’s rapidly changing poetry. In this way, I wish to reimagine the ekphrastic qualities of "Musée des Beaux Arts” in another, more literal, sense: as ek—phrazein, an escape from the form of, or a speaking apart from, speech, a momentary suspension of the rhetorical shaping, whether in its persuasive or generally constitutive function, of language.

For all of its unobtrusive and plain-spoken sobriety, “Musée des Beaux Arts” displays a number of stylistic developments that are quite radical in effect if not in appearance. The opening lines, drawing on a forensic logic, quickly make their exordium, assert a position, and move quickly into proof by example:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
Secure in the authority transferred to it from the Old Masters, the poetic voice liberally assumes a sympathetic audience and assembles examples of artistic representations of suffering to amplify its theme. One might even be inclined to read the low register of the discourse and the ambling, unpretentious ease of the fourth line as an index of the speaker’s honesty and sincerity of perception. To do so, however, would be to overlook the carefully constructed nature of this discourse, based almost exclusively on carefully selected artworks from only one past “master” in order to make a seemingly universal claim about art. Despite the irregular meter and the almost arbitrary division of the poem into two verse paragraphs, one of thirteen lines and the other of eight, the poem is tightly regimented by an inconspicuous rhyme scheme and a strict adherence to its central theme. Yet, the theme finds its greatest elaboration and ultimately its rhetorical “undoing” in the poem’s approximation of the style of Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Through the repetitive use of litotes and various circumlocutionary effects the poem attempts to imitate “how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster;” the poetic speech begins to break away from its discursive argumentation, as the rhetorical elements begin to “double back” upon themselves.

To momentarily adopt the contrast that Mendelson drew earlier, “Musée des Beaux Arts” differs from “Spain,” which makes use of a classically formal verse style to represent suffering at the center of a narrative of historical necessity, in both form and intention. The later poem seeks to avoid the imposed will of a political ideology in order to get at some truth about human suffering that is not subordinate to rhetorical convention. It is mistaken in its assumption, however, that purging poetic language of
ideology also frees it of its rhetorical burden. The poem’s wholesale adoption of the low register and its dissimulation of a long historical and seemingly universalized investment in ethical questions about suffering prove as much. Nevertheless, the spirit of that initial reaction against an imposed speech is preserved in the poem by the very proliferation of its rhetorical measures. The desire to represent more faithfully the human nature of suffering gradually turns into an ethical imperative that suffering not be justified and, as such, not figuratively codified. The poem’s insistent claim that suffering is human, that it always falls short of its miraculous or martyrrological potential is gradually transformed, by way of the rhetorical excesses, into the poem’s bathetic failure to represent its theme.

We notice, for instance, the poem’s interminable reliance on other, more primary accounts of suffering. Never does it present the peculiar state of suffering in its own terms or by looking to its own historical context. Instead, it makes persistent citation of the pain and violence inflicted and suffered in other art works, in other times, as if in trying to pin down the truth of suffering it were vacating the very possibility of suffering in the moment of its occurrence. Linguistically, we notice a complementary silence about suffering in the attempt to name the sufferers not directly, but in other words. If we learn the place of suffering, somewhere on the edge of our histories “in a corner, some untidy spot,” we do not learn the manner of it, its humanity, for that is “Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.” Although those peripheral to the suffering are often named, the sufferers are only referred to obliquely, metonymically: “the miraculous birth,” “the dreadful martyrdom,” “the splash, the forsaken cry,” “the white legs disappearing into the green.” In fact, it is only in the penultimate line of the poem that suffering is given a direct referent—“a boy
falling out of the sky”—and there, oddly figured as a peculiar spectacle (“Something amazing”) divorced of significance that cannot divert others from their voluntary errands, the reference reaches its referent ostensibly to perform a political critique.

One way of accounting for this breaking away from rhetorical forms and out of signification is Paul H. Fry’s notion of the “ostensive moment” of literature, though it will only take us so far. For Fry, the power of poetry qua literature resides in its ability to perform the Heideggerian imperative of “letting be”: “Ostension…is that indicative gesture toward reality which precedes and underlies the construction of meaning. It is not, obviously, to be confused with the altogether fictive and conceptual ‘knowledge’ that ‘existence is meaningless’; rather it is the deferral of knowledge by the disclosure, as a possibility, that existence can be meaning-free” (13). According to this reading, Auden’s rhetorical gymnastics attempt to present suffering to readers without representing it in the form of some figural signification. The ostensive quality of “Musée des Beaux Arts” would not be viewed simply as a nihilistic denial of meaning, nor as a fatalist interpretation of politics, but rather as a participation in the “letting be” that lyric poetry can foster. The poem does not rid us of political questions, nor does it free us of the responsibility to decide which political actions should be validated and which not. It merely suspends – albeit momentarily – the signification process and encourages us to embrace the possibility of freedom from meaning. In Fry’s estimations, this ostensive quality of poetry allows it to escape the duality of structure and history that plagues so much of the modern critical debate about lyric. He quotes T. W. Adorno in “Lyric Poetry and Society” to elaborate on this particular freedom of lyric: “‘The descent into individuality raises the lyric poem to the realm of the general by virtue of its bringing to
light things undistorted, ungrasped, things not yet subsumed.’ By implication, then, it is the historical and structural elements of discourse, and not ‘lyric,’ that commodify actuality’ (Fry 18-19). However well “Musée des Beaux Arts” may appear to perform a poetics of suffering in its ostensive emphasis, the fact remains that Auden’s poetry rarely serves the purpose of merely letting be. To argue so would be to deny the historical exigency of his ethical intervention into poetry, which at this point in his career was shaped by his recent experiences both in the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War. Auden does not simply fly in the face of artistic tradition, but instead challenges a complacent tradition that cannot adapt to confront historical demands.

If “Musée des Beaux Arts” does resolve into moments of ostension, approximating the suspension of signification, it does suggest that insofar as such moments are part of the reality of language, they cannot be explored except through a consideration of the rhetorical dimension of language itself. If Being in its becoming is manifested or can only be known through the rhetorical dimension of language, Auden’s sensitivity to the warp and woof of the rhetorical fabric of his poetic discourse often pits him against the complacent notions of being that so often depend on entrenched rhetorical forms of knowledge. From this standpoint, Auden can be seen as an early advocate of the ethical resistance to the “hateful modality” of egoism theorized by Levinas: “It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty (in its ‘hateful’ modality), that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification” (EFP 85). It seems to me, then, that Alexander Nemerov is on the right track when he insists that Auden’s twentieth-century contextualization helps us see, in effect, that “Pieter Bruegel
made *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* in 1938.” By this assertion, Nemerov suggests that art can revitalize the world and vice versa, and despite the increasing tendency of modern art to abstract itself from reality, it nonetheless “implicitly acknowledges the intolerable world around” (801). His detailed reading of Brueghel’s painting, through the lens provided by Auden, clearly reveals how the overlooked tragedy of Icarus’s fall has been transformed into the violent lesions of the ploughman’s labor and the contorted syntax of the landscape. “Musée des Beaux Arts” may attempt to pass over or take the long way around the suffering it sets out to represent, but this is only in order to more insistently point out the ill-buried corpse we try not to perceive.80

4.

By way of “returning to the scene of the crime,” I would like now to turn toward the moment of Auden’s emigration to the United States and the drastic changes to his poetry that were foreshadowed in his earliest production there. Auden’s defection to America on the eve of historical crisis upset a number of his readers and critics. The result of this affront, however, has led to a somewhat unfair perception of Auden’s politics. At the time, Auden seemed to be walking the best line he could between the flying accusations of party-line Marxists, fellow travelers, and middle-road critics.81 But there’s no question that Auden evoked the anger of compatriots like Stephen Spender, who in his 1941 review of *Another Time* reproved Auden for his abandonment of politics and country (Smith 6). The conflation of Auden’s expatriation and the purported decline of his poetic powers became a commonplace in postwar British criticism, as readers like John Wain and Philip Larkin perpetuated this line of critique (see Smith 7). In the United
States, Randall Jarrell voiced similar reservations in his critiques of Auden’s middle period. Even now, readers cannot seem to assess Auden’s “crime” in terms other than the political. Still, it should be noted that the best among Auden’s critics at this time rarely indulged in deliberate indictments of his politics. Their quarrels were with the decisive change in style during this period of Auden’s production. Thus, in the March-April 1940 issue of *Partisan Review*, even as Jarrell parenthetically speculated that “Between the liberals who attacked Auden as a Communist and the Communists who attacked him as a liberal, the Communists were right: he is Mann by more than marriage,” he could write compellingly, “Auden has lost the quick animal certainty of his daemon, his ‘gift’: the good poems are magnificently and carefully right, the bad ones full of effects that have almost the wrongness of a fallacy.”

It should also be noted that the view that Auden abandoned his politics in 1939 seems to stem mostly from a fallacious line of reasoning that supposed his later accession to a Christian worldview (albeit an unorthodox one) precluded political concerns.

On the sea voyage to New York in January 1939, Auden and Isherwood had occasion to speak openly of “their disaffection with the mass political movements they had hoped to serve with their poetry and plays” (Mendelson, *Later* 3). The length of their stay abroad had not yet been determined, and they foresaw that their time in America would radically alter their lives and careers. Auden immediately capitalized on this innervating change of circumstances by seizing the occasion of W. B. Yeats’s death, the news of which reached them just three days after their arrival in New York harbor, as fodder for exploring his rapidly changing views on poetry. Auden quickly composed an early version of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in which “the opening and closing sections
had almost reached their final form, but the quietly discursive middle section, where ‘poetry makes nothing happen’…had not yet been written” (Mendelson, Later 4). This early version of what would eventually become one of Auden’s most revered poems drew a stark contrast between the relative innocuousness of a poet’s life in his historical moment and the persistent transformative potential of his verse. If we could imagine this poem only through its opening and closing sections, without that crucial mediating interlude, we would no doubt appreciate it as an example of fervent wishful thinking to be read, perhaps enjoyed, and then politely passed over without comment. For example, given the historical context of the poem’s composition, could we possibly pardon these lines from the third and final lay of the poem, without the transformation they undergo in the interceding middle section?

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet. (AT 95)

On their own, these lines function rather as a reactionary swing away from the equally offensive, though for a different reason, lines from another rhetorically effusive poem, “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon” (SP 57). These lines certainly seem self-serving, given the criticism Auden might well have imagined he was about to face regarding his loyalty as a British citizen. But Auden had already begun to reconsider poetry’s relation to the world in light of his changing circumstances and the conflagrations on the European continent. The two immediate products of this
reconsideration were both addressed to Yeats: a prose piece written for *Partisan Review* entitled “The Public v. the Late Mr W. B. Yeats,” followed by the revision of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” with the mediating interlude added.

“The Public v. the Late Mr W. B. Yeats” characterizes Auden’s balanced appraisal of poetry during this time, while presenting arguments from both sides of the political divide. While prosecuting and also defending Yeats’s art for its nefarious political allegiances, the essay ends without passing final judgment. The short piece does end persuasively, perhaps giving a slight edge to the “Counsel for the Defence” and his apology for Yeats’s greater craftsmanship as the index of his nascent citizenship:

“However false or undemocratic his ideas, his diction shows a continuous evolution towards what one might call the true democratic style. The social virtues of a real democracy are brotherhood and intelligence, and the parallel linguistic virtues are strength and clarity, virtues which appear ever more clearly through successive volumes by the deceased” (*P2* 7). But immediately upon reading through the piece one is upbraided again by the “Public Prosecutor’s” exacting litmus test of a great poet: whether he exhibits “firstly a gift of very high order for memorable language, secondly a profound understanding of the age in which he lives, and thirdly a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time” (*P2* 3). Yeats may not miserably fail this test, but his mixed record nonetheless calls for a lengthy deliberation by the jury. Considerably, this momentous call for deliberation attests to Auden’s perception of having reached an impasse in his own poetry and his choice to open it up for debate by a broader public.
“In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in its completed form, expounds upon this impasse even more perceptively to the extent that it opens onto the ethical motive of poetry, but before engaging that poem it may be helpful to turn to the most critical intervention into Auden’s shifting aesthetic, Randall Jarrell’s 1941 essay for *The Southern Review*, “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry.” For Jarrell, Auden’s rapidly changing stylistics presented more hindrance than productivity to his poetry, and although the younger poet’s essay does manage to praise perhaps as much as it blames it tends to represent the impasse Auden had reached as insurmountable rather than potentially restorative. Nevertheless, this seminal complaint is alone in its perspicuous attention to the contiguous relationship of the rhetorical and the ethical in Auden’s poetry. As I have already suggested, Jarrell’s critiques of “middle” Auden are usually most pointed when the issue is style, but we cannot overlook the double-edge of his critique. A large portion of this essay is devoted not only to a characterization of Auden’s changing language but also to his changing attitudes, a concept for which Jarrell is indebted to Kenneth Burke’s *Attitudes toward History*. Jarrell primarily charges Auden with bureaucratizing his technique to the point of formulating an entire attitude of “The Bureaucratization of Perspective by Incongruity” (*TBC* 142). This attitude, as a specific instance of the general process Burke calls “bureaucratization of the imaginative,” is defined as the mechanical substitution “in the realities of social texture, in all the complexity of language and habits, in the property relations, the methods of government, production and distribution, and in the development of rituals” of one imaginative possibility for the whole gamut of available imaginative possibilities (Burke 225). Specifically, Jarrell charges Auden with employing rhetorical techniques to the extent
that they become anticipated or familiar and sacrifice the power or surprise of his verse.

But Jarrell also suggests that this mechanization has potentially inhibiting influences on Auden’s worldview. Auden’s new poetry, Jarrell fears, has given up the struggle and rests too easily on the platitudes of idealism: “But sentimental idealism is a necessity for someone who, after rejecting a system as evil, finally accepts it – even with all the moral reservations and exhortations possible” (TBC 124). In a sense, Jarrell demands that Auden get off the fence and, if he desires to pray, “pray[ ] for anything specific at all.” It is at this point that Jarrell is actually reproducing the political critique that we identified earlier and perceived to be disruptive of the critical capacity of ethics. I quote at length Jarrell’s undue assessment of Auden’s ethics:

Auden’s desire to get away from the negativism typical of so much modernist poetry has managed to make the worst sections of his latest lyrics not much more than well-meaning gush. These sentimental parodies are far more dangerous than any gross ones could possibly be. If we have wicked things to say, and say them badly, not even the Girl Guides are injured; but if we say badly what is “spiritual and valuable,” we not only spoil it, but help to replace or discredit the already expressed good that we wished to preserve. Let me quote Auden against himself: “And what was livelihood / Is tallness, strongness / Words and longness, / All glory and all story / Solemn and not so good.” (TBC 125)

Ethics, for Jarrell, is a matter of right expression, something that comes naturally from true feeling. This is a rather delimiting view, however, as much of Auden’s style could be said to suffer because of his attempt to present the ethical without representing it or to register the ethical as that moment of otherness that is broached when an existing rhetorical frame of language is found wanting or is made to do violence upon itself so as to ameliorate the oppressive effects of figurative manipulation or willed persuasion. Likewise, Jarrell seems to offer a rather delimiting view of rhetoric, which in his mouth carries the strongly pejorative sense characteristic of the early modernist suspicion of
rhetoric as the codification of linguistic technique and which acts in direct opposition to
the imaginative possibilities of poetic language. I yet asseverate, however, that the
rhetorical dimensions of Auden’s language actually accentuate the ethical impulse of his
poetry by a twofold force of codification and disassembly now becoming familiar. There
is obvious truth to and ample evidence for Jarrell’s stylist critique that “In Auden’s later
poems the language becomes weaker […] relatively passive and abstract,” and generally
more methodically rhetorical (TBC 134), but I disagree that this rhetoric is merely a
habitual quirk of Auden’s middle poetry. Rather, it is a technique consciously employed
to aid Auden in his radical submission of the process of communal identification to an
ethical critique.

As prelude to discovering how Auden radically reimagines the communal
functions of poetry in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and how that plays into his
reinvestment in a poetic ethics, we might draw upon another influential critic of lyric for
clarification. W. R. Johnson argues in The Idea of Lyric that the history of the lyric since
ancient times has been inclusive of two interdependent traditions, solo and choral poetry,
neither being mutually exclusive. Romantic poetic ideology and modernist formulations
of poetry like T. S. Eliot’s in “The Three Voices of Poetry” tended to suppress the choral
aspect of lyric in favor of the dominant mode of “meditative verse,” an ‘I’ speaking to
herself or no one in particular, and thereby to redefine lyric as a non-rhetorical, solitary
genre of poetry (Johnson 1-3). Although this has led to a number of confusions about the
nature of lyric poetry, he argues, it has not effectively changed the tradition of lyric, but
only its reception: “The sense of this dual, interdependent nature of lyric has all but
vanished from our modern ways of thinking about poetry, about literature. For all that, if
the name of choral has almost disappeared from our literary vocabulary, the choral imagination and the choral act have, so far from disappearing, made an extraordinary comeback in modern times” (Johnson 177). One such comeback we might hesitantly attribute to Auden, although Johnson only speaks of him in passing. Auden was among those modern poets who, faced with the prevalent rarefied and meditative definition of lyric, took up the rhetorical impulse at the heart of the choral tradition and began to re-imagine what the modern lyric might look like. Johnson explains this moment as the manifestation of a crisis through the development of a “bad conscience” in modern poetry:

Yet despite its occasional successes in adapting itself to the fragmentation of communities and the habits of reading that are fostered by the printed page and by technological education, the purely literary lyric, even in the hands of Yeats, remains an essentially unsatisfactory genre. The absence of a real audience and the failure of performance engender an anxiety, a kind of bad conscience, a sense of the poet’s irrelevance, impotence, and unreality – a frustration of function that the printed page, so far from being able to mitigate, can only intensify. This normal condition of the modern lyric poet, who refuses impersonalism and imagism, […] Yeats and a few others escaped only through extraordinary genius and extraordinary effort… (16-17)

The key distinction between my approach and Johnson’s, however, is that in order to conceive of a particularly modern “choral” poetry, I argue, we must account for the historical exigency that calls forth this rhetorical revival. Furthermore, since that exigency is largely a reaction to the political violences of the mid-twentieth century manifested in World War II, the Holocaust, and the entrenched divides of the Cold War, then this “choral” poetry cannot be conceived apart from this bad conscience that has both historical and literary origin. Whereas Johnson imagines choral poetry as a corrective to the bad conscience of the failing sense of a poetic community, under these
historical circumstances it is best to pursue the path laid by R. Clifton Spargo in his reading of the “central hermeneutic conflict between the personal and public” in Holocaust elegy (EM 210). In his view, the Holocaust elegy as practiced by poets such as Randall Jarrell or Sylvia Plath serves its critical function by “reflecting a historical moment of conformity in order to implicate both speaker and listener in the very social phenomenon to which they might wish to object,” and it succeeds aesthetically and, moreover, morally to the extent that the reader does not “consent[ ] to a view of history in which the plight of [others] must be interpreted fatalistically (Spargo 213, 210). By this reading, we are compelled to view the rhetorical poetry being written in response to mid-twentieth century reality as inclusive of that bad conscience in order to meet the demands of historical reality. Auden’s poetry is a particularly fruitful site for analyzing this bad conscience, not solely because he did revolt against the constructivist principles of impersonalism and imagism while simultaneously writing as an inheritor of them, but because his self-conscious use of rhetoric underscores the ethical valence of this bad conscience. In his essay “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Emmanuel Levinas also speaks of the mauvaise conscience that underlies the ethical impulse. Good conscience, according to his conception, is security in being, the freedom of being that is disclosed through knowing in the ontological tradition. Prior to this, in the pre-intentional consciousness, there exists a passivity that is bad conscience. Bad conscience does not grant the freedom of being but calls one to respond to one’s right to be, calls one to be open to question. In his words,

What one sees in this questioning is being as mauvaise conscience; to be open to question, but also to questioning, to have to respond. Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (moi). But, from that point, in affirming this me being,
one has to respond to one’s right to be...One has to respond to one’s right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one’s fear for the Other. (*EFP* 82)

Auden’s rhetoric is subject to this same bad conscience because, as we discussed earlier, Auden wished to acknowledge the suffering of others without undue reference to figural representations that would justify or condone their suffering. This desire is necessarily critical of ideological conceptual frames of various kinds, whether they are political, moral, or literary. Of course, by submitting the suffering of others to poetic treatment Auden necessarily draws his themes into the field of representation. But his continual attempts to make full account, to incessantly question his own use of language, before the other and prior to any self-assured knowledge is not merely utopian, but at best a practical aesthetic that disrupts or even ruptures outworn rhetorical frames and via the suspension or prolongation of the process of signification opens up the possibility of discovering new means of identification and ethical relation.

Turning back to “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” as it appeared in *Another Time*, we can begin to trace a clear origin of this practical ethical aesthetic. The opening section makes a timid claim that poetry can only hope to create admirers; beyond that, it holds little sway over the world. Despite the ostensible impotency of poetry, however, this opening section is actually embarking on a radical challenge of the inherited norms of one strain of the lyric tradition, elegy. The thematic inefficacy is reinforced by the failure of the pathetic fallacy in the opening lines:

> He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
> The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost deserted,  
> And snow disfigured the public statues;  
> The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
> O all the instruments agree  
> The day of his death was a dark cold day. (*AT* 93)
The elegiac tradition has long drawn on the pathetic fallacy to transform the personal loss of the elegist into a shared communal loss. By mapping the despair and anguish of the poet onto the natural world, the pathetic fallacy creates the funereal atmosphere necessary for conveying a communal grief. Traditionally, this grief would be the element that allows the persona to posit a choral “we,” even if only imaginary in structure. Everything else being different – and we notice that the poem cannot even decide whether it wants to identify geographically the difference of and now, for the expatriated Auden, consummate question of nationality – at least “we” could share in grief. In his insightful reading of the poem, Jahan Ramazani suggests that “Auden disguises the pathetic fallacy by transporting it to the city, where it almost seems literal to talk of instrument’s agreeing; but even scientific measurement projects human terms onto the nonhuman world” (185). I perceive less continuity in Auden’s use of the pathetic fallacy, however, and find that this elegy ironically upends the tradition by opening formulaically on a “dead” winter scene, but then undercutting the trope by disavowing the powers of the poetic vision in favor of objective, scientific “instruments.”

The pathetic fallacy is thus reduced to the mechanization of complete impersonality, which not only severely undercuts or neutralizes the imaginative spark of visionary rhetoric that often completes the mournful work in elegy. This mechanization also systematically empties the accepted forms of communal grief and reconciliation of their restorative position. The result is to sever the death and the mourning from their typical functions in the process of communal grieving and thus insist on their incompleteness and their irreducibility to a therapeutic cure, which always implies a narrative of justification. The lines following suggest just how unconcerned with a poet’s death the natural world (the traditional vehicle of the
pathetic fallacy) really is: “Far from his illness / The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests, / The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays” (AT 93). The obvious collusion of natural and social motivation in the last line also suggests the divorce of poetry from political matters such as class antagonism. This reiteratively mechanized failure of the pathetic fallacy gradually vacates the elegy of all those structural elements, natural and social, that allow poetry to be interpreted in terms of something else. Even as the opening section insists on the inefficacy of poetry, it simultaneously attempts to penetrate to the unadulterated essence of poetry and what it can possibly do.

In addition to this mechanized sabotage of elegiac conventions and the suspension of traditionally sanctioned collective rhetorical stances of mourning, the first section also employs a number of bureaucratizing rhetorical techniques aimed at removing all sense of human agency, as sanctioned by the Romantic lyric tradition, from the poetry. The speaker of this section, we notice, is not interested in the veneration of a poet, but in the erasure of him, and it is mournful speech that performs this elegiac reversal: “By mourning tongues / The death of the poet was kept from his poems” (AT 93). One might be inclined to take solace in this “keeping” separate of poet from poems. After all, that means that something immortal is preserved in the poetry that we may not and should not attribute to the poet, who is a mere vehicle. Knowing too that Auden was ambivalent toward Yeats and his poetic legacy, regarding him as a formidable master and predecessor but also a philosophical adversary, we may think Auden is merely indulging in a lighthearted critique of the man while still maintaining the greatness of Yeats’s poetic achievement. But that is to overlook the more poignant critique that Yeats
“became his admirers,” which is not simply that his legacy will be preserved by remembrance but that he will be changed and submitted to a process of modification:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living. (AT’93)

In each line the poet suffers a greater loss of agency; his fate does not rest in the hands of human tradition, but is left to the devices of what amounts to a faceless and incompatible living machine. This mechanized view of the cultural tradition is further compounded by Auden’s use of intricate spatial metaphors and the ironic reversal of the pastoral conventions of elegy. Jarrell cites the extensive spatial metaphor of this first section as an example of the extravagant mechanical incongruousness in Auden’s middle poetry:

The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed… (AT’93)

Indeed, as Jarrell complains, the metaphor is applied with bureaucratic regularity “completely—and consequently as disastrously—as any efficiency expert could wish” (TBC 143). But this bureaucratic regularity takes on greater significance when we see this spatial metaphor as an intentional extension of the poem’s initial focus on space and landscape. Here the pathetic fallacy of the elegiac tradition is reversed: the external topography is projected onto the internal emotions, again revealing the failure of “feeling.” The result is a kind of mirror image between internal and external, between mourner and mourned. Each has been systematically modified by rhetorical techniques,
and yet each remains finally mute and resistant to change under the pressure of the poetic imagination.

Leaving no stone unturned, the bureaucratic imposition of rhetorical devices everywhere results in the resistance to identification, either with the poet, with the world, or with a collective of mourners, even as it continually gestures at the ultimate need for identification between the poet and his community based on elusive otherness of the poetry. This may evidently be the reason that Jarrell and other critics of Auden sensed failure in his middle poetry. There is indeed quite often a failure to establish a collective identity; yet underneath this failure of identity lies the poetry’s ethical success. Auden’s rhetorical devices systematically question as they mechanize identifications and thereby bring about a kind of ethical resistance to representation, a trace of which can just be glimpsed: “A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual” (94). We hear an echo here of that bathetic “something amazing” that so compelled the reckoning with suffering in “Musée des Beaux Arts.” It is this slight surplus of thought or feeling that withstands the rhetorical bureaucratization of the imaginative, that refuses to occupy the center of our focus, and that secures an elusive yet possible sense of community in the subtle transition from “a few thousand” to “one.”

In contrast to the opening section of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” the final section responds with an excess of poetic vision. Separating the “Irish vessel” from “its poetry,” its visionary rhetoric exonerates the accidents of history and immortalizes poetic language, as we saw above: “Time that is intolerant…Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives” (AT 95). This finale, which admonishes the living poet to attend to his craft and discover an “unconstraining voice,” would appear to have won out
over the first section’s hesitancy in adopting a basis for communal identification,
although there is no definitive evidence of a resolution beyond its vaguely political
intimations. While the opening section failed to discover a communal rhetorical identity
and thus could not posit a “we,” the concluding one apparently discovers an excess of
possible communal identifications and yet will not claim its pronominal realization.
Despite this final reticence, this section is choral—in the sense of Johnson’s notion of a
collective speech of clear conscience—in all but name. It discovers all manner of values
upon which to establish a community, not least of them being “the farming of the verse”
(ATA 95). It also realizes a capacity for forgiveness that foregoes the “hate” of political
configurations like the nation state in favor some more viable, if not fully expressed,
community. However, it should be noted that the poem ends still in the mode of
resistance to political identification:

    With a farming of the verse
    Make a vineyard of the curse,
    Sing of human unsuccess
    In a rapture of distress;

    In the deserts of the heart
    Let the healing fountain start,
    In the prison of his days
    Teach the free man how to praise. (ATA 95-96)

As a challenge to the opening section and its views of poetry, these lines abandon the
rhetorical strategy of disenchantment by way of mechanization for a more traditionally
persuasive language of exhortation. Yet the persona is still reluctant to slip into an
unconcerned condition and rely on outmoded political ideas. The vision is stark and any
action must come from new values. The poem finally offers not a vision of progress, but
a vision of creation out of nothing, providing little to no explanation how poetry can achieve these heights in contrast to its utter autonomy of the first section.

Perhaps it is most rhetorically apt that the final section speaks from the rhetorical position of poetry itself because this highlights the mediational quality achieved by the middle section. The additional section does not resolve the opposition between the two kinds of lyric performed in the opening and closing sections of the poem; the section further fragments the overall scope of the poem and yet it subordinates the perspectives of the poem to a general criterion of ethical relation. The addition’s most obvious effect is to undercut the victories of the final section’s choral as, in more stark terms than the opening, the speaker reveals that “poetry makes nothing happen” (AT 94). This notorious line has, I believe, led to more confusion than clarification of Auden’s changing aesthetic at this time. More indicative are the qualifications that follow. They claim that poetry originates and “survives / In the valley of its saying…A way of happening, a mouth” (AT 94).86 This is not simply a divorce from the world of action. The complicated topographical metaphor implies that poetry is both fixed and mobile, that it occupies a kind of eternal space that does not interest the “executives” of worldly and political affairs, and yet has a recurrence that can change and paradoxically impinge on or even shape our actual existence. Entrenched in this notion of poetic language is the co-presence and mirroring of social engagement and artistic autonomy. The metaphorical substitution of time for space, of duration for situation, creates an image familiar to many of Auden’s poems of this time. It evokes a double image of the timeless and timeliness that arises out of the possibilities of poetic speech to realize the actual world. In one poem, which gives the name to its collection, he writes, “Another time has other lives to
live” (AT 49), and in another, “When have we not preferred some going round / To going straight to where we are?” (AT 23). The persona’s frank assertion that “poetry makes nothing happen” employs a rhetoric of closure, which is at once a refusal to make meaning and an active production of meaningful possibility. In this sense, the closure of rhetoric is also its own passive resistance to signification, a twofold force that is the opening to ethical inquiry in Auden’s poetry. In more practical terms, the mediational quality of this middle section is representative of the mediational quality Auden claims for poetry. Poetry is a space, or to adopt the peculiar mixture of his metaphor, a changing space over time, a process by which the rhetorical forms of meaning can be interrupted and dismantled and submitted to an ethical evaluation prior to a significant reintegration. Auden most clearly emphasizes the ethical value of this process by placing it in the second person address, the confrontation of a self under question before the other it grieves that preexists any communal identification. The “I-You” pronominal relation of this section is, rhetorically, the closest that Auden comes to positing a “we” in the poem that is not threatened by the reduction to questionable political or moral foreclosure of a relation to otherness.

As Auden had already come to realize through the transformative poetry of his middle career, represented by Another Time and The Double Man, a critical ethics could no longer validate the communal identifications supported by nationalism and the dominant political ideologies of the late-thirties, especially as those identifications were quickly atomizing the world’s population and propelling the nations toward total war. By the time Auden wrote “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” he had already conceived of a grief so large as to necessitate a new conception of belonging:
When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
When grief has been made so public, and exposed
   To the critique of a whole epoch
   The frailty of our conscience and anguish,

Of whom shall we speak? (AT 102)

Most undoubtedly, the answer was not Freud. The question is a rhetorical longing after a
new speech and a new community, a new concept of humanity to praise. Could the
ethical imagination potentially restore viable fictions of community for the world’s
populations? This was undoubtedly a central question for Auden during the decade of the
forties and led him to pursue a rhetorical poetry that quite often served the ethical end of
a momentary freedom from meaning and potentially manipulative representation, if only
to reinstate a freedom to think and know anew a better community. If we recall briefly
Lucy McDiarmid’s insightful study Auden’s Apologies for Poetry, the rhetorical shift in
Auden’s career can be understood as a “hidden poetics” that seeks nothing less than an
earnest reimagining of literature’s function for humanity. As she argues, this quite often
takes the paradoxical route of a “disassoci[ation] of [literature] from a responsive
audience” (McDiarmid 161). Another way we might say this is that poetry eschews real
audiences for possible audiences. The realization of the latter depends on an ethical
engagement with poetic language, which requires the critical reappraisal of the canons,
topoi, and structures of rhetoric upon which it draws. To that end Auden continues
throughout his latter career to explore the various ways in which, in its most active sense
possible, “poetry makes nothing happen,” a sentiment which he continually revised
throughout his career but never abandoned. The winking self-reflection depicted in the
title of “‘The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning’” (1953) may stand as a general stance
for the rhetorical attitude Auden developed of always insisting that quotation marks be
inferred around his poems. Often, the self-involved rhetorical posing of his later poetry, if it quite often works counter to its professed purpose, creates a proliferation of speech that asks to be regarded as contingent upon the ethical realm outside of the poem. If his rhetorical techniques therefore seek to render the poem nothing or trivial, their process of saying nevertheless reminds us of the ethical conditions or morally suspect life that gave rise to the poetic moment and the need for imaginative possibilities.

5.

In the remainder of this chapter I would like to sketch out just one course of inquiry that led Auden to submit his rhetorical poetics to ethical ends: his treatment of history. If earlier modernist aesthetics had to reckon with the rhetorical possibilities of imaginary political consciousness, as we saw in the previous chapter, Auden spent a great deal of his career exploring how the ethical use of language could be pointed toward the historical realm. From his early interest in leftist politics to his later attempts at tracing a Christian theology of time and human progress, Auden recurrently interrogated history and historical narratives for their ethical potential. To perform this brief inquiry I will attempt to demonstrate how the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and his various interpreters, particularly regarding the concepts at the heart of “Substitution” (1968), the central chapter of Otherwise than Being, can help illuminate the ethical dimensions of Auden’s intervention into history. As we shall see, the attempt to approach the historical is simultaneously a recognition of and reaction against the forms of violence that underlie and sanction historical progress. For that reason, I argue, Auden’s reappraisal of historical narratives cannot be fully understood outside of what Levinas helps us to see is
the sacrificial basis behind all narrative. In order to demonstrate how this sacrifice becomes such a central theme for both Levinas and Auden, I will first perform a brief reading of “Substitution” in order to limn the essay’s constitutive sacrificial concerns and its general challenge to narrative. Then, I will apply some of these lessons to some of Auden’s own interventions into history, which, we shall see, always operate through the consistent narrative structure of sacrifice.

By claiming that the ethical gesture of substitution for the other, requires that “the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor” (OTB 111), Levinas challenges traditional conceptions of agency. In and of itself, this reversal of roles demands a serious reappraisal of the narratives underlying rational moral inquiry. But the accusatory nature of the ethical experience, its “obsessive” character, even challenges the ethical grounding of narrativity itself, which is so often structured on interest and causality as to participate in the dominance of metaphysics. In the central essay of Otherwise than Being, “Substitution,” Levinas writes:

This transfer, other than interested, ‘otherwise than essence’, is subjectivity itself … is not to draw from suffering some kind of magical redemptive virtue … The recurrence of the self in responsibility for others, a persecuting obsession, goes against intentionality, such that responsibility for others could never mean altruistic will, instinct of ‘natural benevolence’, or love. (111-112)

Contrary to the solipsistic egoism of the ontological tradition, by which the self is authorized by its own representational narratives, Levinas traces an ethical response that interrupts any representational ends, indeed a call to responsibility that is disruption of the self from itself in the face of the other. This responsibility must not forego its disruptive quality either. Its ethical character depends on its obsessive concern for the other that even the mere reversal of roles (rendering the persecuted solely active and the
persecutor wholly passive) could not maintain. In this way, Levinasian ethics may be said to seek the forestallment of narratives or to waylay, on the hither side of interpretation, the thrust of knowledge.

It is precisely at this point of disruption, with its anti-narratological bent, that Levinas’s ethics faces problems of language. “The tropes of ethical language” aid in the exposition of the approach and the face, he writes, but beyond “certain structures of description” Levinas must acknowledge the betrayal of the Saying by the Said and the inevitable reinscription of narrative in language (*OTB* 120). Doubtful moments like this in Levinas’s work uneasily rehearse a response to Jacques Derrida’s early critique in “Violence and Metaphysics” that the ethical may prove complicit in the violence of metaphysics despite Levinas’s efforts to the contrary.87 Derrida dwells on this more than potential danger by citing the reinscription of violent narratives in Levinas’s thought. Invoking a parricidal narrative that haunts Levinas’s first major exposition of his ethical philosophy, *Totality and Infinity*, Derrida asks, “But will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case [Plato] could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by *speaking* Greek, by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king? And since it is a question of killing a speech, will we ever know who is the last victim of this stratagem?” (*WD* 110). The questions beg Levinas to consider whether his own deposition of a narrative of violent return (as represented by the archetypal homecoming of Ulysses) for one of a going-out toward the unknown (as represented by the faith of Abraham) will suffice.88 And Levinas offers a complex, indirect response to Derrida, which we hear in the double-edged pith of statements like “The persecuted one cannot defend himself by language” (*OTB* 121). There is the sense that every attempt to speak
the ethical is doomed to betrayal, to the reinscription of violence the Saying would seek to oppose. And there is the sense that the ethical moment itself is ensured by the subjection exacted by language to respond, obsessively, beyond one’s capacities.

The reinscribed narrative of violence par excellence in Levinas’s philosophy, under which we may subsume Derrida’s parricidal narrative, is sacrifice. As a number of readers have noted, sacrifice plays a central if dubious role in the concept of substitution, the one-for-the-other. 89 Much of the description of substitution in *Otherwise than Being* is premised on a unique trope of sacrifice, a structure rendered void of redemptive value, which challenges the traditional narrative structure of sacrifice. To thematize the victim’s persecution as a socially redemptive value, Levinas insists, would be the equivalent of transforming the victim’s suffering into a commodity in an economy of violence, thereby negating or overriding the movement outward from the same toward the other. Yet by working within a tradition of sacrificial representation, Levinas quite often approaches treating the victim as a means to an end. His resistive trope of sacrifice is haunted, nevertheless, by notions of redemptive value:

The one affected by the other is an anarchic trauma, or an inspiration of the one by the other, and not a causality striking mechanically a matter subject to its energy. In this trauma the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom. Responsibility is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value. (*OTB* 123)

One catches here an elaborate contortion to preserve the redemptive sacrificial narrative while maintaining the disruptive force that would undo causality. In an odd locution a redemptive quality is *re*-absorbed *prior to* the fact as a value or the possibility of value. As Spargo notes, at moments like this Levinas comes dangerously close to “an account of ethics in which the conflation of an absence of choice and the fact of being chosen
nevertheless for violence, which perfectly describes the victim’s fate within the sacrificial narrative fundamental to so much of Western culture, is nevertheless the very meaning of ethics” (VM 177). This quandary, traced through the writings of Levinas and Derrida, also leads Hent de Vries to suggest that all philosophical attempts to “escape or at least thematize this complicity” with violence must reckon with the fundamental lesson of Abraham’s sacrifice: “that only a suspension of the ethical (which risks a certain violence and even monstrosity) can open the possibility of responsibility in both practical and intellectual matters.” How we interpret much of Levinas’s response to violence, therefore, hinges on the contingency of sacrificial narratives and obsessive ethical vigilance at the heart of his works, what we might abbreviate as ‘sacrificial obsession.’

In turning to the theme of sacrifice, I also draw Levinas’s work into the field of historical inquiry. In particular, I participate in the discourse that reads Levinasian ethics as a response to the Holocaust and the connotations of sacrifice it inevitably evokes. The historical dimension of Levinas’s ethical project, critics like Robert Eaglestone and Kelly Oliver suggest, proffers a history of the victims, in opposition to evidentiary histories which overlook and suppress otherness. They argue that vigilance for the ‘invisible in history,’ the dead, enslaved, and silenced often excluded from mainstream historical narratives, pervades his works. According to Eaglestone, Levinas resists the evidentiary logic of the discipline of history, which therefore leads him to seek other forms of historical truth:

For Levinas, the visible and connected ideas of evidence (evidence, that brought to sight or to visibility) will always tend towards a totality which will destroy otherness through the construction of a ‘neutral and middle term’. The only way to prevent this is through the paradoxical manifestation of what he calls the ‘invisible’: a phrase he often turns to
describe the ethical relation (ethics are to die ‘for the invisible’ \(TI\) 243), for example). \([HP\ 157]\)

In a different, yet related, locution, Oliver goes so far as to say that “only witnessing to what \textit{cannot} be seen [in history]—the process of witnessing itself—makes ethics possible (42, emphasis added). In line with this, I argue that Levinas’s sacrificial obsession bears larger relevance to those works of the mid-twentieth century which register a similar unease over narrative representations of violence. Auden shares many of these concerns with Levinas. In fact, he memorably wrote, in “Homage to Clio” (1955), of the reckoning with the “invisible” or “inaudible” in history:

\begin{quote}
but we, at haphazard

And unseasonably, are brought face to face
By ones, Clio, with your silence. After that
Nothing is easy. \((CP\ 611)\)
\end{quote}

But even up to this encounter with the untold in history, Auden’s poetry is marked by a persistent anxiety over the sacrificial narratives that underlie representations of history. Later in “Homage to Clio,” for example, despite discovering an ethical history that can forgive, Auden still must acknowledge the violence that precedes historical knowledge:

\begin{quote}
Clio,

Muse of Time, but for whose merciful silence
Only the first step would count and that
Would always be murder, whose kindness never
Is taken in, forgive our noises

And teach us our recollections. \((CP\ 613)\)
\end{quote}

Auden’s obsession with sacrificial narratives may be at least partially attributable to two major experiences as a witness to violence: his brief excursion to Spain in 1937 and his military service in post-WWII Germany. By elucidating in the final parts of this chapter
what I perceive as themes akin to a Levinasian sacrificial obsession in Auden’s poetry, hopefully without drawing undue analogies between the vastly different thinkers, I wish to demonstrate, in the manner of perceptive readers like Jill Robbins and Gerald L. Bruns, how a poetics that espouses a resistance to narrative representation, can be enlisted as a species of the ethical.

Continuing on with our thematic concern for the overlooked and silenced, we can readily acknowledge that one fruitful means of entry into Auden’s career is by way of what he leaves out. Auden was a notorious censor and much of his critical legacy is built as much upon what he suppressed as what he preserved in his works. We have already had occasion to read one of his most popular poems, “September 1, 1939,” (in which he speaks of “Waves of anger and fear…Obsessing our private lives” [SP 95, my emphasis]), which fell prey to his editorial pen for its “rhetorical dishonesty.” Another one cited for the same crime is 1937’s “Spain” (and its later version “Spain 1937”), written in the wake of Auden’s brief and disenchanting participation in the Spanish Civil War. Auden travelled to Spain early in 1937 seeking active duty with the Republican armies against the insurgent Fascist forces, ostensibly for the purposes of strengthening his citizenship and his writing (Mendelson, Early 195-96). His hopes to perform some useful service like driving an ambulance were frustrated by general disorganization and bureaucracy, so he was assigned to compose and transmit propaganda over the radio, which because of its short range ended up serving little purpose but preaching to the choir. Very quickly Auden became disenchanted with the whole experience and after a short trip to the frontlines he returned to England, officially putting an end to his first attempts at active war duty. Retaining much of the style of the propaganda Auden
broadcasted over the airwaves in Spain, the poem he composed upon his return excited a number of readers because of what many felt to be its misguided political fervor. George Orwell chastised Auden for his complacency with murder in the infamous lines “To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death, / The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” (SP 57). Orwell writes in 1940 that

the phrase ‘necessary murder’…could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a word. Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder…. The Hitlers and Stalins find murder necessary, but they don’t advertise their callousness, and they don’t speak of it as murder; it is “liquidation,” “elimination,” or some other soothing phrase. Mr. Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot. (qtd in Mendelson, Early 321)

Auden later excised substantial portions of the poem, changed the offensive phrase to “the fact of murder” (AT 92), and then cut it from his collected poems altogether saying that it was dishonest of him to feign belief in the “wicked doctrine” that goodness equals success (CP xxvi). This moment of self-censure is noteworthy. In the concluding lines of the poem, Auden claims that “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon” (SP 57), suggesting an exemption from the need of help or pardon for those who succeed, while denying succor to those, the victims, who require it. As Mendelson argues, Auden’s attempt to reconcile goodness with historical progress operates in this poem as mere wish fulfillment rather than a coherent vision of history because it silently passes over another form of the violence it would oppose (Early 320). But further to the point, in later rejecting these sentiments Auden learns from a corrective written into his poem that Orwell ignores. Far from demonstrating a general ignorance of political reality, “Spain” offers a clear insight into the sacrificial logic underlying historical narratives. By
the phrase “necessary murder,” Auden meant to convey his own turmoil in having to accept the inhumanities performed by those to whom he pledged allegiance. Because he thought it right to oppose the greater evil of fascism did not thereby make it right for him to condone the Republic’s cruelties. Therefore, he insists upon the conscious acceptance of guilt in the atrocities performed in the name of greater good. It is the last lines of the poem, however, which offend by releasing the victors from guilt, exonerated as they are by goodness, and not the no doubt insensitive but nonetheless conscientious recognition of “necessary murder.” In fact, Orwell can be charged with the greater inattention because he misses the key lesson of the poem: that every historical narrative, left-wing or right-wing, operates on a sacrificial basis and none are innocent.

The rhetorical structure of “Spain,” which panoramically displays the progression from a humanist past into a utopian future, continually devolves upon the present as the mediational point of ethical action. The oratorical register seeks to persuade, but most of all it would imbue the present with a sense of urgency through the refrain of “but to-day the struggle”:

Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek,
The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero…
    But to-day the struggle…

To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,
    But to-day the struggle.
(SP 55, 57)

This pamphleteer manner repeats a cozy narrative of historical progress, but the ethical trace of the “necessary murder” threatens to dispel the logic of this narrative in two possible ways. First, the last lines and their doctrine of “goodness equals success” severely undermine the historical urgency. The struggle for the right action of the present
would be rendered moot by the knowledge that the good always succeed. There would be no rhetorical need to incite right action were that the case and the good would have no need to obsess themselves with the victims in Spain. Second, the return to the unknown that characterizes the carpe diem afflatus of “But to-day the struggle” disrupts the structural logic of progressive historical narrative, challenging the causal relation of the past to the present to the future. If to correct the evils of the past revolutionaries need only grasp the moment and manufacture a more just future, then there is the possibility of radical transcendence beyond the constraints of a linear historical narrative; the time is now, the poem insists, and not determined. If this does not disrupt narrative altogether, it is because the poem still insists on a sacrificial logic, that the wrongs of the past be made to furnish future good. One would not call “Spain” an ideal Levinasian text (if there can be such a thing) because of its quite apparent complicity with violence. It simply does not demonstrate the sustained resistance to violence, even beyond possibility, that Levinas’s critiques of philosophy and history insist upon. But it does provide a telling example of de Vries’ assertion that only by way of a suspension of ethics, and the risk of violence that attends it, may the possibility of responsibility be broached. In fact the choice not to may be devastating: “[T]here remains a striking difference between risking the worst, suspending the ethical for the sake of an absolute obligation…and committing a crime against humanity, deciding for the worst of the worst” (41-42). Although according to a careless reading “Spain” could be said to exemplify such crude narrative truisms as ‘You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,’ it also displays an ethical vigilance in its refusal to surmount its sacrificial moorings and in its insistence on guilt, a fictional yet no less deliberate attempt to substitute oneself for another, even after the fact.
The theme of sacrifice continued to obsess Auden well beyond “Spain” and plays a central role in his major later works. “Memorial for the City” (1949), the poem that addresses the devastation Auden witnessed on his United States Strategic Bombing Survey of Germany, is saturated with sacrificial readings of history in its attempt to reckon with the losses of World War II. The poem opens by briefly indulging ahistorical representations of nature and objective materiality: “The crow on the crematorium chimney / And the camera roving the battle / Record a space where time has no place” (CP 592). But these representations quickly subside in deference to the greater obligation to witness history as seen through human eyes, as experienced through human bodies. This accession to history (which during the course of the poem is represented by way of a descent from objective distantiation to embodied responsibility: “This is Adam waiting for His City. //Let Our Weakness speak [CP 595]) again takes the form of sacrifice, this time to secure the ties of fraternal community: “They died, unfinished, alone; but now the forbidden, / The hidden, the wild outside were known: / Faithful without faith, they died for the Conscious City” (CP 594). Unlike the murders of “Spain,” the victims of this poem are reverently named and given the succor of remembrance. They are retroactively brought into the folds of knowledge and faith and their deaths recognized for their contributions to the founding of an enlightened community. Again Auden’s sacrificial narrative fails to think the victim seriously by submitting her suffering to a redemptive value while denying the historical uselessness of the suffering that characterizes World War II and the Holocaust. But the formal remembrance of the dead, the disquieting “memorial” that binds the collective has the effect of forging a new identity structured on the relation to otherness. We might adapt Levinas’s allusion to Rimbaud—Je est un
which is not merely a sign of the estrangement of the self, but also the recognition of “the other in me” (OTB 125) as the part of my subjectivity that accounts for and is premised on otherness, as a means of characterizing the pluralized identity gestured at in “Memorial for the City”: Nous sont les autres.

My inquiry into Auden’s historical poetry is meant to register a pervasive complicity with sacrificial violence and, therefore, a continuous ethical failure from the standpoint of Levinasian mandates. But failure is a privileged sign in the ethical philosophy that maintains that one can never have fully answered the other. It is, we might say, the insurance on ethical return. The final prose paragraph of “Vespers” (1954) implies little development from the initial “necessary murder” of 1937: “For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand” (CP 639). But it has also been my contention that Auden’s obsession with sacrificial violence, his refusal to let it slip out of recognition, ensures an ethical significance for his poetry, perhaps one akin to the “untiring wakefulness” or “total insomnia” Levinas incites in “Damages Due to Fire.”92 This significance deepens with Auden’s rehearsal of Christ’s substitution for humanity in “Horae Canonicae.” Let us turn briefly to “Compline” (1954), the penultimate poem of this sequence, to examine one last time this ethical disquietude. After the fact of violence, the sacrifice reenacted daily by civil society, we eagerly await “The instant of recollection / When the whole thing makes sense” (CP 640). But instead of that face to face reckoning, we reach the limits of memory, forgetfulness and the deferral of responsibility:

it comes, but all

I recall are doors banging,
Two housewives scolding, an old man gobbling,
A child’s wild look of envy,
Actions, words, that could fit any tale,
And I fail to see either plot
Or meaning; I cannot remember
A thing between noon and three. (CP 640)

As before these lines present us with an amphibology that hinges on ethical signification. First, the lines enact a moralist’s critique. This poet does not spare the faults of humanity, but delights in anatomizing every little sin and foible that comes under his scrutiny. Neither is the persona spared the critical thrust. Although he would offer up shabby humanity as his scapegoat and the reason for his repressed memory, his is the failure to see. However, the lines also perform an ethical appraisal of otherness by proxy, by substitution. Gone are all the strokes of plot and narrative form, yet strikingly the faces of the forgotten surge up with renewed force. Although arrayed in a language of failure, these lines bear within them the gesture of substitution, a humbler version of the divine intervention of Christ on behalf of all others. Although the speaker cannot bear the memory of his guilt in the crucifixion (which occurs in the liturgical hours “between noon and three”), his accountability for the scolding housewives, gobbling old man, and envious child metonymically stands in stead of the archetypal act of Christ. In this moment poised between memory and the immemorial he is at once answerable and accused before all others, the history of suffering, as it were, predicated on his very susceptibility to persecution on their behalf.

Perhaps it is obvious that Levinas’s and Auden’s allegiance to vastly different religious traditions does not preclude their sharing in admiration for the ethical act of substitution. Spargo suggests that from one perspective, Levinas’s “Substitution” centers upon a de-Christologized subject who nonetheless exemplifies “a central mechanism of the Christ myth—specifically [the] notion of Christ’s limitless responsibility, as one who
bears the burden of all humanity’s sinfulness and makes himself responsible for it by way of a substitution” (VM 151). Given their extensive familiarity with larger intellectual traditions within Western Judeo-Christian society and their shared desire to discover a transcendent ethics outside of the context of sacred interpretation, it is no surprise that Levinas and Auden actually draw from similar sources, especially regarding the use of sacrificial narratives. For Auden, this desire pays off in the use of the Divine Office as the structuring principle of his poem, a rite which, Jan Curtis explains, “seeks to recover and present the divine initiative—the redeeming work of Christ who gives meaning to a history which men and women create.”93 The truly ethical gesture of Auden’s “Horae Canonicae” rests on this transubstantiation of the divine will into the human praxis of subjectivity which seeks the possibility of responsibility within the historical realm. There is a divine edict, a transcendent substrate to these words (“the rhythm / Past measure or comprehending” [CP 641]), but even that is sacrificed to a prayerful vigilance for the other. Perhaps Levinas and Auden discover their greatest resemblance not merely in the ethical suspension, but in the political search for an elusive justice. Auden concedes that

It is not easy
To believe in unknowable justice
Or pray in the name of a love
Whose name one’s forgotten (CP 641);

but it is nonetheless the condition of history and the obsessive foundation to the narratives we tell each other.

We finally recall that Auden was an example for many late modernist American poets. No small part of this was due to his ability to transgress the high modernist abolition of the rhetorical and, with it, the political from poetry, while still maintaining
fidelity to the unique autonomy of poetry. This chapter has attempted to underscore the uniquely ethical character of Auden’s careful balancing act between these two compelling forces. It furthermore has attempted to justify the extent to which Auden deserves recognition for his preeminence in engaging the ethical challenges of modern poetry. While earlier modernists like Wallace Stevens may have helped to clarify the ethical nature of modern poetry’s impasses and insisted upon the cultivation of ethical consciousness in their poetry, Auden was the poet who clearly restored ethics to a rhetorical praxis in modern poetry and brought poetic language back into the fold of lived experience for the generations to follow him. His legacy, as we will discover in the following chapters, was not unanimously appreciated nor was it definitively positive for those who followed him in the endeavor to craft an ethical poetics. Randall Jarrell, one of Auden’s many poetic progeny, for example, continued to exhibit an embattled relationship with Auden’s ethics and remained critical, for all of Auden’s sharply reactive attitudes toward political violence, of the coextensive complicity with that violence in his ethically inflected narratives of sacrifice. But Auden’s legacy does excel in its open-endedness, in its continuous invitation to take up socially constructed forms of language to the purpose of ensuring their responsible usage.
“HIS GESTURES ARE FULL OF FAITH IN—OF FAITH”: MASTERLY DISSENT AND PROTECTIVE ECONOMIES IN THE EKPHRASES AND MONOLOGUES OF RANDALL JARRELL

When a newly selected edition of Randall Jarrell’s essays was published in 1999, under the title No Other Book, Ellen Bryant Voigt remarked, “Some of us would be a great deal happier about [its] release…if it hadn’t occasioned the same old judgments lifted momentarily from their brine.” What she meant was that whereas Jarrell’s legacy as one of the most gifted, witty, and maybe also critically astute of twentieth century American critics of poetry remains intact, for many contemporary readers or students his contributions to mid-twentieth century poetry still seems minor or even inconsequential. As an intellectual and formidable presence amid renowned peers—including Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Berryman, and to a lesser extent Delmore Schwartz and Karl Shapiro—Jarrell gets his due, but his poetry (at least until quite recently) less so. Even as his critical taste dominated his age, his poetry proved embarrassing, with its sentimentality and general non-conformism to many of the New Critical poetic norms, some of which he purportedly helped to establish. James Dickey’s humorously dialectic review of Jarrell’s 1955 Selected Poems gives voice, if wryly, to this embarrassment. Much like Auden’s “The Public v. the Late Mr W. B. Yeats,” Dickey’s review makes a compelling case for and against the value of Jarrell’s poetry and ends rather inconclusively. Despite the efforts of a growing number of newly appreciative critics who have attempted to redeem Jarrell’s reputation over the last decade and a half, the jury deciding his place in the annals of American poetry may still be said to be out.

The recent resurgence in critical interest in Jarrell, however, offers some promising means of establishing his importance for the study of twentieth-century
American poetry. William H. Pritchard, the most prominent contemporary biographer and defender of Jarrell’s reputation, makes a compelling case in *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* that any argument for “the permanent interest and value of this writer” cannot “be made on the basis of the poems alone—good as they often are, and undervalued at present as I take them to be” (5). Even as this chapter attempts to position Jarrell as a distinctly representative voice of his generation, my own judgment is with those who recognize the merits and the suggestive difficulties of his poetry. James Longenbach and Alan Williamson, for example, have not shied away from interrogating the sentimentality of Jarrell’s poems and the implications it has for granting modernist poetry greater access to othernesses that can appear embarrassing. As Longenbach argues, those poems that to readers accustomed to modernist abstraction and introspection seem troublingly emotional or trivial are quintessentially Jarrellian: “Jarrell wanted to risk even more embarrassment [in poetry] by including a wider range of human emotion” than other modernists typically allowed (56).

Taking precedence from more recent criticism that clarifies implicitly and explicitly the ethical dimensions of Jarrell’s poetics, I propose that Jarrell served as the most outspoken advocate among his contemporaries for imagining ethics as central to the work of poetry and so helped us to envision what lay beyond “the end of the line” that the so-called “middle generation” encountered in the American modernist legacy. Stephen Burt demonstrates Jarrell’s singular importance to the creation of a more responsive personable poetry for the modern age by explicating what he calls Jarrell’s “interpersonal” or “intersubjective” style. Although Burt prefers to read Jarrell through the psychosocial lens of intersubjectivity developed by D. W. Winnicott, many of the
themes he parses in the poetry through this framework divulge relations that are implicitly ethical in mapping how selves encounter one another and how poetic speech can facilitate coming “closer to the subjects and victims of politics” (25). As he writes, “Jarrell’s style responds to the alienations it delineates by incorporating or troping speech and conversation, linking emotional events within one person’s psyche to speech acts that might take place between persons” (Burt 22-23). Although I find Burt’s reading compelling for its implied ethics, my approach is significantly more indebted to R. Clifton Spargo’s hermeneutic for reading Jarrell’s manner of ethical protest in his poems. Spargo demonstrates the explicit prominence of the ethical in Jarrell’s poetry, which often stages for its readers dilemmas that compel the recognition of disfranchised others and through these dilemmas seeks reorientations in political commitments to victimized others. In “The Ethical Uselessness of Grief: Randall Jarrell’s ‘The Refugees’,” he argues that even in this early poem Jarrell’s commitment to challenging the social conventions guiding our ethical responsibility to others, often through the rehearsal of fatalist or negative critiques of reigning political ideologies discerned in the conventions of public mourning, is resoundingly apparent. Furthermore, in The Ethics of Mourning, Spargo elucidates a model for understanding the ethical connotations that arise from the disruption of lyrical economy, which I will have occasion to apply later in this chapter regarding Jarrell’s employment of ekphrastic rhetoric. According to this model, the resistance of the economic demands of lyric—or lyric’s pretensions to purity as autonomous language—should be read as analogous to a resistance of conventional forms of moral responsibility, which imply a self-enclosed and self-replicating identity whose truth is founded on the exclusion of others.97 By this reading we are better able to
understand the ethical project that runs throughout Jarrell’s poems even beyond his early wartime poems of dissent. As these critics help to show, if only for this contribution to poetic ethics alone, Jarrell’s poetry deserves our continued attention.

We cannot appraise the poetry, however, without first acknowledging the curious critical reality that Randall Jarrell is always in some manner beholden to W. H. Auden. It is perhaps partially a consequence of the notoriety that Jarrell gained from the influential essays written early in his career, “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry” (1941) and “Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden’s Ideology” (1945)—essays duly revered for their analytical perceptiveness and longevity as accurate evaluations, even though they were written decades before the complete arc of Auden’s career had been surmised—that he is remembered today primarily as a critic. Jarrell was to become known for his acerbic wit and his “murderous[ly accurate] intuitive phrases” which seemed to seal the fate of their subjects, and he first honed and demonstrated these abilities to a wide audience in his essays on Auden. Indeed, the importance of his early essays and reviews, which included work on Auden, Yeats, Tate, and Winters, among others, probably led to his invitation to speak as part of Princeton University’s Mesures Lecture Series on April 30, 1942, the same lecture series that only the year previous had solicited “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” from Wallace Stevens, and works from other noted critics, Philip Wheelwright, Cleanth Brooks, and I. A. Richards. The depth of Jarrell’s knowledge of Auden even afforded him another engagement of six lectures specifically on the work of the elder poet in the spring of 1952. That Jarrell staked a claim to a major portion of his critical acclaim on Auden’s turf was well-appreciated by his contemporaries and Jarrell even good-humoredly acknowledged his
pride in this fact through the narrator of his satirical novel *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), of whom it is said by the novel’s central character, “*He knows Auden by heart, practically.*” And although Auden’s stylistic influence over Jarrell’s poetry seems to me largely overstated by some critics, especially when considering the obvious and competing influences of poets like Frost, Stevens, and Warren, Jarrell never did attempt to deny or suppress the presence of Auden in his own and his contemporaries’ work.

My argument is complicit to a degree with these familiar and, in some cases, undeniable narratives of inheritance and influence by the very placement of this chapter. But I am also wary of the fact that certain of these narratives have conspired to relegate Jarrell to a secondary poetic status, as a kind of “failed Auden,” a judgment which I believe the breadth and individually-realized aesthetic of Jarrell’s poetry simply do not merit. And if we do not learn when to resist them I am afraid these narratives may conspire to build a more tragic legacy out of the malaise Jarrell sometimes expressed in jokes about his creative blocks: “Help! Help! A wicked fairy has turned me into a prose writer!” Therefore, while this chapter begins with the familiar narrative of Auden’s “paternal” influence on Jarrell’s career and generally submits to the Oedipal allegory we assume in such literary relationships, its ultimate goal will be to underscore the ambivalence attending this inheritance. Jarrell follows Auden in the attempt to restore ethical responsibility to the modern poetic tradition, often, as we shall see, explicitly acknowledging his tenacity where his predecessor had failed. Jarrell even follows Auden stylistically in realizing this ethical commitment through the ekphrastic tradition, though the ways that each engages the tradition differ radically in particular practice. The burden of this chapter will lie in enumerating those differences of practice and acknowledging
their worth. Like Auden, Jarrell was a capable systematic thinker and was at numerous times in his poetic career and throughout his critical essays capable of taking the long historical view. But by and large Jarrell chose to abdicate from the security afforded to him by this theoretical brilliance and in his poetry step down into the tedium of daily psychic and emotional existence and examine the relationships with others that shape human lives. While Auden may have been able to recover some theoretical comfort in narratives of sacrifice and the “cement of blood,” Jarrell is obstinate in his refusal of such complacency with suffering and violence, and as a corrective to this he gives us the kind of personally responsive poetry that has been wrongly perceived by otherwise perceptive critics as sentimental gush. This productive swerve, or clinamen as Harold Bloom has labeled it, away from the practice of Auden and, more importantly, away from long-sighted ethical attitudes that of themselves have a tendency to eclipse the particulars of personal experiences of human suffering is what truly merits recognition in Randall Jarrell’s poetry.

1.

Freud noted the prevalence of ambivalence, “the direction towards the same person of contrary—affectionate and hostile—feelings,” in his patients’ attitudes toward the people to whom they were nearest. While I thoroughly agree with those critics who would characterize Jarrell’s relationship to Auden as ambivalent and informed by even agonistic elements of rivalry, I find Ian Sansom’s judgment that “[t]he development of Jarrell’s career is in fact identical with the history of his responses to Auden’s work and this history is one of complex successions of love and hate” to be far too reductive.
There is something more than self-flattery in Auden’s apocryphal remarks to Stringham (“Randall Jarrell is really just trying to flout Papa.”) and Stephen Spender (“Jarrell is in love with me.”) regarding the young Jarrell’s criticism (qtd in Sansom 278). And we might also say, without expecting too much of a fight, that there are elements of Oedipal animosity in Jarrell’s early criticism directed specifically at Auden and directed at the Audenesque vices he perceived in other poets. But rather than focusing on the especially Freudian emphasis in Sansom’s assessment of Jarrell’s “love and hate” for Auden, I wish to concentrate on what it is that brings Jarrell to Auden, or perhaps Auden to Jarrell.

For starters, I propose that we turn to Jarrell’s essay “The End of the Line” as a means to answering this question. This essay professes a rather bold thesis for its time. Not only does it deny that modernist poetry is utterly different, a radical break from tradition, but it argues contrary to the neoclassical dogmatism of Yvor Winters and the classicist polemics of Pound and Eliot that modernist poetry is “an extension of romanticism, an end product in which most of the tendencies of romanticism have been carried to their limits” (KA&C 77). As was typical of Jarrell’s best criticism at this time (e.g. “Changes in Attitude and Rhetoric” and “Levels and Opposites”), the audacity of this essay dazzles by its seeming effortlessness in tacking against the prevailing critical opinions. Directly upon positing this grand historical claim, Jarrell provides supporting evidence in the form of one of his infamous lists: a rapid-fire enumeration of the characteristics (thirteen in all) of modernist poetry that draw resemblances between romanticism and modernism. He even provides ingenious reasoning as to why the romantic character of modernist poetry had previously gone unnoticed, one example of
which characterizes the essentially dialectic nature of poetry and criticism: “Most of the best modern criticism of poetry is extremely anti-romantic,” a number of his contemporaries might readily object; however, Jarrell would simply respond that “a poet’s criticism is frequently not a reflection of but a compensation for his own poetry; and this change in theory has helped to hide the lack of any essential change in practice” (KA&C 77). In the end, Jarrell performs a telescopic projection of the crisis of poetry from the fundamental break and inception of modernism to its moment of closure:

Then, at last, romanticism is confronted with an impasse, a critical point, a genuinely novel situation that it can meet successfully only by contriving genuinely novel means—that is, means which are not romantic; the romantic means have already been exhausted. Until these new means are found, romanticism operates by repeating its last modernist successes or by reverting to its earlier stages; but its normal development has ended, and—the momentum that gave it most of its attraction gone—it becomes a relatively eclectic system, much closer to neoclassicism than it has hitherto been. (KA&C 77)

To many this may seem nothing more than a self-serving revision that places the fundamental agon of modernism at its end rather than its beginning, thus ideologically sanctioning the belated endeavors of Jarrell and the “middle generation.”

But Jarrell’s insight about the relationship between Romanticism and modernism also has the advantage of aligning literary history with the unfolding of political history. The development of a Romantic tradition, for Jarrell, conforms to the development of capitalist society and the progress of enlightenment philosophy, and these all reach their limits not in the central crisis of the high modernist generation, World War I, but in the political antagonism and failures of the 1930s and in World War II. Jarrell asks for confirmation of this toward the end of the essay: “For a long time society and poetry have been developing in the same direction, have been carrying certain tendencies to their
limits: how could anyone fail to realize that the excesses of modernist poetry are the necessary concomitants of the excesses of late-capitalist society?” (KA&C 82). Therefore, in addition to its redefinition of popular notions of modernism, “The End of the Line” also offers a redefinition of Romanticism as the prevailing literary trend not of just the past two centuries but of Western capitalist society itself.110

The theory is intriguing but taken past a certain point it becomes as discomfiting as the theory of modernism Jarrell rejects, and he seems to acknowledge this by the end of the essay. He brings the discussion summarily to a close, withholding further evidence in order to keep the theory “partial” and err on the side of “description, not indictment” (KA&C 83). Furthermore, he severely undermines his earlier historical claims about an “English” poetic tradition and the Western political world at the end of his argument by acknowledging a fundamental difference between American and British modernism: “No one can understand these English developments if he forgets that, while we were having the modernism of Pound, Stevens, Williams, Moore, Eliot, Tate, Crane, Cummings, and all the rest, England was having the modernism of the Sitwells” (KA&C 83). It was American modernism that fully exploited the Romantic tradition to its limits; British modernism either lagged behind or experienced something very different. All at once, we begin to see the very cohesive unity of agreement between the literary and the social that Jarrell had been painting dissolve into a number of related, certainly, but fragmented, disperse, and perhaps antagonistic sectors. If anything, it is this dynamic failure of representation, which had begun as a corrective to the prejudice and dogmatism of classicist readings of modernism and ended by forfeiting its own corrective prior to the point of being reactionary, that most honestly captures the limits to which modernism had
come. And it is also at this point that Jarrell offers Auden up as a paragon. Up to this point, Jarrell had spoken of modernism as the existing cultural paradigm, one which was exhausted and mechanistically repeating itself, but still eking out an existence at “the end of the line.” Then, Jarrell projects a rhetorical afterword that had been inconceivable according to the foregoing historical theory:

I have no space to write of later developments. Auden was so influential because his poetry was the only novel and successful reaction away from modernism; and a few years later Dylan Thomas was so influential—in England—because his poetry was the only novel and successful reaction away from Auden. But his semi-surrealist experimentalism could be as good as it was, only in a country whose poets had never carried modernism to the limits of its possibilities. (KA&C 82-83, emphasis added)

For Jarrell, the communitarian shift that the arts underwent in the thirties was, for all of its extremities, essentially an image of modernism turned on its head, which is to say there was still no break from modernism, except for Auden. Without a clear explanation, Jarrell gestures at something fundamentally different in Auden’s poetry—something having no doubt to do with his idiosyncracies, his individualism, or his curious mix of communitarianism and individualism—that is able to successfully move beyond the paradigm of modernism. Or does he? The ambivalence of the accolade is quite apparent. I think I assume correctly in attributing “his semi-surrealist experimentalism” to Thomas, though the supporting cultural reality (“only in a country whose poets had never carried modernism to the limits of its possibilities”), which was perhaps aimed at tempering Thomas’s achievement, has the curious effect of also diminishing Auden’s. This is also Auden’s country—of origin at least—and Jarrell is coming very close to tearing down his paragon by situating his accomplishment in a British context which Jarrell regards as somewhat belated and provincial.
What I think this dramatizes is the extent to which most poets of Jarrell’s generation came to identify with Auden as a figure at once centrally situated in the modernist tradition and fundamentally outside of that tradition for reasons of history and ideology. Despite Jarrell’s attempts to encapsulate, perhaps even domesticate, modernism in “The End of the Line,” it is no less apparent that he foresaw the next step as having to come out of that tradition. It is nonetheless Jarrell’s tradition. Although written much later in his career, Jarrell’s “The Old and the New Masters” (1965) performs this same lesson. Purportedly a learned objection to “Musée des Beaux Arts,” this poem begins with a dialectical response to Auden’s argument, picking up the discourse where Auden had trailed off:

About suffering, about adoration, the old masters
Disagree. When someone suffers, no one else eats
Or walks or opens the window—no one breathes
As the sufferers watch the sufferer. (CP 332)

The appropriation of Auden’s studied erudition in these opening lines is itself masterful, from the forceful enjambment of the first and second lines to the succinct reduction of the earlier poem’s argument. Jarrell’s ideological revision is no less remarkably apparent. According to the enjambment, Jarrell’s critique of the easy assumptions of Auden’s docent depends on positioning “The Old Masters” in chastened form at the end of the previous line, with disagreement soon to follow.

Perhaps the strongest effect occurs in the transition from the third to the fourth line where, as in a momentary catch of breath, Jarrell’s dash suspends Auden’s assumptions of human indifference to suffering and ushers in the previously neglected concept of “adoration”—intense, uninterrupted focus on the significance of suffering. The reference is to the point in Auden’s poem where his language breaks code with the
preceding lines and lopes off in a meandering iambic stroll: “While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (Auden, *CP* 179). Jarrell’s fourth line, however, demands strict attention with its two anapests and final reversal in the dactylic “sufferers,” an effect that recalls the metric tradition known as “sevens” in English poetry, which typically involves a three-beat line of seven syllables (when the metrical foot is binary, more when ternary like the above example) and exploits metrical inversion to underscore significance. Here the effect is to make the theme of suffering “thicker” or more salient by underscoring the shared suffering of the spectators and the spectacle.

Throughout the first two verse paragraphs of “The Old and the New Masters,” Jarrell examines two paintings by “old masters,” de la Tour’s *St. Sebastian Mourned by St. Irene* and van der Goes’ *Nativity* to give evidence of a very different tradition of humanism, not plagued with indifference, wherein “everything / That was or will be in the world is fixed / On its small, helpless, human center” (*CP* 333). It is only in the last paragraph that Jarrell admits the indifference so emphasized by Auden by way of a historical narrative of decline, which tells that it is the “new masters” who “show the crucifixion / In one corner of the canvas” or who “paint a subject as they please,” and it will be the “last master” who “in abstract / Understanding, without adoration” puts

Colors on canvas, a picture of the universe
In which a bright spot somewhere in the corner Is the small radioactive planet men called Earth. (*CP* 333)

The evocation of this world’s proper name, “Earth,” at the very moment it has been forsaken underscores this historical demise, and attributes the loss of a fixed center to the loss of adoration for humanity. This reasoning, however, finally comes to resemble
Auden’s in “Musée” in many respects. Jarrell’s poem makes explicit the nostalgia for tradition that Auden represents in absentia. Jarrell’s tradition clearly resembles and evokes through its language a broad humanism. But Jarrell also acknowledges the tandem Christian tradition that Auden leaves largely unarticulated in his poem by specifically citing paintings with religious subjects. Like Auden he writes from a clearly historicized moment to which he belongs and from which he cannot extract himself. For Auden, this historical moment clearly colors our moral interpretations of the past and access to the “truth” of that past is occluded by that moral filter. For Jarrell, that past is more definitively cut-off from the present, and the “disagreement” that lingers from start to finish of Jarrell’s highly cogent and articulate description of a shared humanist tradition renders this an exercise in nostalgia for a unified culture that no longer exists or perhaps never did. Also like Auden, however, this poem shows Jarrell clearly writing in the midst of the modernist moment, yet willing and even desperate to imagine a vantage-point outside of that tradition by reflecting on poetry’s ethical force.

This shift toward a preoccupation with the ethical in the modernist poetic tradition is the other fundamental reason that Auden comes to Jarrell, in that paradoxical sense of being approached if only in imagination by a poetic ancestor. After the excoriating performance of Jarrell’s second essay of length on Auden, “Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden’s Ideology” (1945), an essay that has virtually defined the corpus of Auden’s work for the American academy with its tripartite distinction between the Old (Freudian), the Middle (Existentialist), and the New (Pauline) Audens, it has become commonplace to disparage Auden’s moralism. After all, in the mere span of four years, Jarrell had gone from calling Auden misleadingly sentimental and “quite liberal” in “Changes of
Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry” (TBC 125), to the full-scale indictment that he “has saved his own soul, but has lost the whole world—has forgotten even the nature of that world” (TBC 186). But to attribute this disparagement to an indifference about Auden’s ethics, to read the plea “Stop preaching, you’re ruining your poetry” as one premise in the argument “Anyway, preaching has no place in poetry,” is one of the fundamental mistakes of the modernist critical tradition; it is to confuse Jarrell with his mentors Warren, Brooks, and Tate for whom indifference to ethics may be a more polemically-correct attitude. The critical terminology of these essays on Auden, beginning with the Burkean “attitude” and moving to the Marxian “ideology,” demonstrate Jarrell’s fundamental concern with the ethics of language production. Jarrell is ambivalent, in the rich sense, about Auden’s ethics: he brings them into proximity to acknowledge their difference. If we say that “Freud to Paul” is an example of tearing down an idol or “flouting Papa,” we must simultaneously acknowledge that it is Auden who gives Jarrell entrée into the discourse of ethics and allows him to air opinions on the subject in a critical atmosphere that might not have been otherwise receptive to such discourse.

Let us not forget that Jarrell had some insight into the large ethical questions that were raised in the time of world war, strong moral opinions that were shaped by his service in the Armed Forces as a flight instructor and as a peon in the vast inhuman machinery that was the army, which he described “like being involved in the digestive process of an immense worm or slug or something—[…] it doesn’t seem terribly stupid or at all malicious, just too big to have any sense or meaning—a mess rather” (qtd in Pritchard 99). These particular experiences during the war obviously accentuated the
differentiations that Jarrell felt compelled to make between Auden’s ethics and his own. But during a time when he was struggling to reconcile himself to “the obscurity of the poet,” it was Auden who built that bridge toward the audience for Jarrell. The peak of indictment that “Freud to Paul” reaches at its close—the taking to task of Auden’s willfully petty contentions with middle-class society during the height of the war—is, after all, the moment that Jarrell breaks through the academic confines of his essay to bring these ethical question to bear upon the audience:

[T]his was written, not in 1913, but within the months that held the mass executions in the German camps, the fire raids, Warsaw and Dresden and Manila; within the months that were preparing the bombs for Hiroshima and Nagasaki; within the last twelve months of the Second World War. The logical absurdity of the advice does not matter…. But the moral absurdity of the advice—I should say its moral imbecility—does matter. In the year 1944 these prudent, progressive, scientific, cooperative “bores and scoundrels” were the enemies with whom Auden found it necessary to struggle. Were these your enemies, reader? They were not mine.  

(\textit{TBC} 186-87)

Though Jarrell’s vituperation may be playing to his own advantage, the differentiation he makes is nevertheless fairly descriptive of the primary ethical differences between Auden and Jarrell. Despite the fact that Jarrell felt isolated as an intellectual from the men who served with him and from the uneducated and willfully misinformed populace of America, it would be these people—the “bores and scoundrels” that Auden frequently sacrificed to his grand historical narratives, the “sufferers among sufferers,” to adopt Jarrell’s more sympathetic depiction in “The Old and the New Masters”—that Jarrell would write his poems about. Several early commentators, such as Robert Lowell, James Dickey, Elizabeth Bishop, and M. L. Rosenthal, acknowledged this tendency toward protectiveness, a concern for the underrepresented in Jarrell’s poetry. Several commentators, including those just mentioned, would also at times find this practice
sentimental, condescending, or even offensive, particularly regarding his portrayal of women and children (which became the primary subjects of his poetry). That this development in Jarrell’s career, the side that has typically made critics most uncomfortable with his poetry, comes out of his engagement with the ethical tradition that Auden made available to later modernist poets finally needs acknowledgment.

I have already argued that Auden renewed the ethical valence of modernist poetic language by welcoming a return to rhetoric in his poetry. This notion of a “return to rhetoric,” if unmediated, is somewhat of an oxymoron. The high modernist banishment of rhetoric was merely a gesture in favor of organic formalist principles to suppress the rhetorical grounds that substantiate literary production. There can be no poetry without rhetoric. Jarrell acknowledged as much when he famously called rhetoric “an old friend” when called out for his critical review of Conrad Aiken in 1941 (L 42). But modernists maligned the interest-laden use of everyday language in contrast to the “truth” of poetic speech so much that “rhetoric” at times became a catch-all negative moniker rather than a critical tool of distinction. Indeed, Jarrell was also guilty of taking a rather narrow approach to the idea of rhetoric in Auden’s poetry in “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry” and he frequently misused the term in other contexts, such as his remark to Allen Tate regarding his own first published poetry: “I’m sure you’re right about some of my lines being limp (though I do think that in the future when people are thoroughly used to reading accentual verse some of them will seem a lot stiffer); and I hope I can improve; but it’s an occupational risk, a defect of a quality. In other words, I’d rather seem limp and prosaic than false or rhetorical, I want to be rather like speech” (L 30). Here we see Jarrell upholding the typical modernist distinction between poetic
“truth” and rhetorical “dissimulation,” though peculiarly we also see a reversal in that Jarrell aligns truth with everyday accentual speech and not metrical verse.

In order for the “return to rhetoric” to make sense, we have to imagine it as a kind of “eternal return,” as an acknowledgement within the poetic speech of its rhetorical nature so that it is capable of being rhetorical about itself. In this manner the poetry becomes thoroughly invested in its own construction and attempts to examine those premises underlying it (i.e., ideological convictions, psychological motives, etc.) that in ordinary speech may go unexamined. In reading Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” we perceived this return of rhetoric through the esoteric poetical praxis of ekphrasis. As my understanding of “ekphrasis” in this project goes well beyond the usual understanding of “the verbal representation of visual representation,”¹¹⁷ I emphasize the unique etymological distinction of ek + phrazein, a speaking out of/apart from speech; that is, a speech that can speak against itself or suspend its own interests, evoking out of its own production an “otherness” to itself. The literary tradition of ekphrasis has since its inception revolved around the idea of the paragone, or the antagonistic relationship between word and image and the struggle for dominance between these rival visual and linguistic arts. From the conceptual point that I am outlining, however, we may interpret the ekphrastic moment by proceeding as if blind to the image and wholly focused on the production of the word, which, in a manner of speaking has become paragonal to itself.¹¹⁸ That Jarrell adheres to this unique understanding of ekphrasis is not simply apparent because he wrote a response to arguably the most famous poetic example of ekphrasis of the century. Traditional ekphrasis understood as the direct representation of a work of art, usually painting or sculpture, by a piece of literature occupies a number of
Jarrell’s major poems. But the ekphrastic meditation on the ethical consequences of literary representation can be said to occupy his entire oeuvre.

2.

Before we move on to explore some of the poems that seem especially representative of Jarrell’s poetical project, it might prove useful to take a detour through one of Jarrell’s most intriguing critical pieces regarding poetic practice, “Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry” (1942). My reading of this piece will help to situate Jarrell in a specifically ekphrastic tradition, which in turn will prepare us for acknowledging the ways that he revises this tradition toward ethical ends in his poetry. One may question the validity of drawing theoretical purchase from this essay, which was presented as part of the Mesures lecture series at Princeton, because Jarrell chose never to have it published. Pritchard, Jarrell’s primary biographer, remarked in 1990 that the lecture had not survived but he was able to piece together enough contextual reference about it to say that “it appears to be a continuation of his concern…to show that good poems don’t look in a single direction but rather combine ‘alternative possibilities’” (94). Yet, Thomas Travisano has since discovered the essay in complete order but without a title among Jarrell’s papers in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. Why Jarrell did not publish the lecture is still up for debate. It could be merely that he had so little time between his delivery and his enlistment in the army that he did not prepare it for publication and never again got around to it. Travisano has suggested the liable scenario that Jarrell decided initially to suppress the lecture because it would have flown in the face of the preeminent criticism of the time, namely Yvor Winters’ and,
more importantly, John Crowe Ransom’s, Jarrell’s late mentor (Milestone 693). In a letter to Edmund Wilson, dated April 1942, Jarrell shares his feelings regarding the discontent his lecture might occasion: “I’m calling the lecture ‘Levels and Opposites,’ and part of it is to the effect that the ‘logical’ structure of poetry is, very often, roughly dialectical, this with many examples; but don’t tell this to my friends, for they would disown me, or to my superiors, for they would discharge me—or would if they knew or cared what dialectical meant” (L 60). These conjectures, however, all presume that Jarrell never had time to return to the essay or was roundly dissatisfied with it. Interestingly, though, the essay was carefully preserved in fair copy and not destroyed.

My own critical intuition is that Jarrell ultimately found it unnecessary to publish “Levels and Opposites” because its primary tenets—that a poem is essentially temporal and not spatial, and is dialectical (that is multi-directional or composed of opposed forces) and not unified—are implied in other examples of his criticism. Be that as it may, Travisano has argued with some success that the essay deserves our critical attention because it “ought to put to rest any lingering stereotypes of Jarrell as a primarily negative—and wholly instinctive—critic by revealing the dynamic understanding of poetic structure that informed his critical and artistic practice” (Milestone 696).

Furthermore, this essay offers us a rare opportunity to see Jarrell reflecting on more general questions about poetry, the kind that enhance our understanding of Heidegger’s claim that in destitute times the nature of poetry becomes a poetic question (PLT 94). That the poetic question about the nature of poetry is highly indebted to the tradition of ekphrasis is a striking and largely underappreciated suggestion of this essay.
What Jarrell laments in this essay is that “[w]e think of the structure of poetry too much in static terms” (LO 697). At its most fundamental level, Jarrell’s argument is aimed at correcting the static notions of structure implied by New Critical and other modernist critics whose theories of poetry owe much to the concept of “imagism” professed by Pound. “An ‘Image,’” Pound wrote, “is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

And among his directives for aspiring poets he advised “[d]irect treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective” (Pound 3). Primary focus on the image, an amalgamation of intellectual and emotional forces into the direct revelation of the “thing,” became the model for the New Critics when they began devising interpretive strategies that remained attentive to the “thing” on the page. Contrarily, Jarrell stresses what in actual practice Pound and other imagist-minded poets would have to admit is undoubtedly the case: “But the poem is completely temporal, about as static as an explosion; there are no things in a poem, only processes” (LO 697). The kind of stylistic compression that Pound professes may have energized language for the modernist, also manifested itself in the ideological excision of action in language, what Pound indeed calls “rhetoric.” “The ‘image’ is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric,” he writes in Gaudier-Brzeska; “Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being” (Pound 83). For Jarrell, the temporal unfolding of language in the poem is what is primary and is what Poundian modernist style tends to suppress as mere deception. In his review “Poetry in War and Peace,” Jarrell faults just this stylistic tendency in Marianne Moore’s verse: “Everything combines to make the poem’s structure visual and instantaneous rather than auditory and temporal, a state rather than a process…. Poetry has its own principle of
Indeterminacy: if the position of something is fixed with the highest degree of accuracy, its movement cannot be” (KA&C 127-128).122

In other words, in his critique of Moore Jarrell suggests more generally that the impulse to follow imagist principles is fundamentally misguided in the realm of poetry. Take, for example, the analogy that Jarrell constructs between reading a poem and a snowball rolling down a hill:

>We hear or read a poem just as a snowball rolls down a hillside—most of the snow clings only for a moment and is thrown off, but some keeps rolling, more is added constantly, and quite a respectable snowball (or total impression) arrives at the bottom of the hill. A person who sees anything static about that progress is beyond hope; and what would you think of anyone who pointed to the snowball and said, “Look, there is a hillside?” You would point out that though the snowball is, certainly, a kind of summation of the hillside, it is a very summary summation. One cannot talk, in the usual easy way, of experiencing the poem as a whole. (LO 697-98)

As Jarrell continues to make clear throughout the essay, this incomplete and slippery quality is not merely a necessary and perhaps regrettable condition of poetry. Poetry’s ability to intensify and incorporate into its purview opposing and “nonunifying forces” constitutes the bulwark of its power. Poetry’s dialectical structure is able to dramatically represent the composition of thought and the construction of truth by “start[ing] from one position and end[ing] at a very different one” (LO 699). Jarrell also sees in poetry the facility of mediation between extremes to construct “middle view[s] that oppose[ ] and reconcile both” (LO 703). That this reverence for poetry’s temporal, processual nature takes the form of an antipathy toward the image suggests a notable instance of precedence in the ekphrastic tradition: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1766).123
In the modern tradition of ekphrasis, Lessing’s essay has served as the quintessential text for explaining the paragonal relationship between the visual and linguistic arts, usually represented synecdochically as the struggle between “painting” and “poetry,” and this despite Lessing’s focus on the sculptural representation of the mythological demise of Laocoön known as *The Laocoön Group*, now located in its restored condition in the Vatican Museum in Rome, and not strictly speaking on any examples of painting. Nonetheless, the essay delineates the differences between the representational practices of the visual arts and poetry and not quite circumspectly gives the advantage to the representational domain of poetry. While Lessing early on gives the visual arts a unique advantage in the provenance of beauty (see chapter II), as a convention “beauty” ends up serving as “the supreme law of the visual arts…[to which] whatever else these arts may include must give way completely if not compatible with beauty, and, if compatible, must at least be subordinate to it” (15). Poetry, on the other hand, does not suffer so much at the hands of “beauty,” not being a visual art, and therefore has freer play in its means of representation. As Lessing later states (see chapter XI), poetry is subject to the law of invention but has many means of execution, whereas painting suffers under the constraints of execution and has little choice in the matter of invention (62). And the constraints of material execution prove severely limiting for painting. In contrast to poetry’s temporality, painting is spatial, restricted to a “single moment of time” (Lessing 19). Furthermore, this suggests that painting is unable to represent action by means of climax or transition but must choose singular moments that can give the imagination free play to supply narration to the objects represented. Its provenance is more rightly “stasis” than “movement” (Lessing 20). Elaborations of
Lessing’s theory have tended to result in the association of a whole array of ideologically devised attributes which play up the dichotomous relationship between the different arts. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, for example, offers these lists of frequent associations: “image” [in the visual arts] as bodily, present, replete, still, silent, natural, and feminine; and word as abstract, rational, active, eloquent, and male” (14). W. J. T. Mitchell has argued convincingly that Lessing’s *Laocoön* can be rehabilitated for modern readers by “exposing the figurative basis of the spatial and temporal genres” and by seriously considering his insight “that the relation of genres like poetry and painting is not a purely theoretical matter, but something like a social relationship—thus political and psychological, or (to conflate the terms) ideological. Genres are not technical definitions but acts of exclusion and appropriation with which to reify some ‘significant other’” (*Iconology* 103, 112). Taking Lessing’s own distrust of systematic theorizing into account may lead us to see more readily how Lessing’s strict policing of the borders of the two genres is more a product of the ideological construction than naturally deduced principles about different forms of art. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that Lessing exhibits a rather strong iconoclasm in favoring the representational means of poetry in his attempts to keep the genres separate.

That Jarrell’s position in relation to the modernist critical camp as expressed in “Levels and Opposites” resembles Lessing’s in his relation to the German academy toward the end of the eighteenth century is further confirmed by their shared enthusiasm for a kind of “negativistic” quality to poetry. Jarrell, we recall, emphasizes the disruptive, nonunifying, and impure elements of poetry, elements that are revealed—or, it is interesting to note, forgotten or lost—with the unfolding of the poem in time. Likewise,
Lessing suggests that “the poet alone possesses the craft of description by negative terms and, by mixing together the negative and positive, combining two appearances in one” (54). It is by this temporal, or narrative quality that poetry is able effectively to surpass the representational powers of painting, because even though it is not strictly materially visual, poetic language can exploit the visual representation of painting while simultaneously giving the visual representation the freedom to speak. If Lessing were compelled to condone the obverse of the old phrase “painting is mute poetry” with “poetry is blind painting,” he would most likely reply: “Yes, but poetry is painting nonetheless. I doubt, however, that painting, which cannot speak can even aspire to poetry.” Less flatteringly, Jarrell’s dissent from the critical and poetic vanguards of his day can possibly seem as reactionary as Lessing’s objection to the “modern” art of his day, particularly painting, which refused to keep its designated place. Lessing writes, “Painting, as practiced today, comprises all representations of three-dimensional bodies on a plane. The wise Greek, however, confined it to far narrower limits by restricting it to the imitation of beautiful bodies only” (12). When Jarrell too speaks out against the encroachment of spatially instantaneous visual representations upon the realm of poetry he sounds similarly iconophobic. Furthermore, Jarrell and Lessing both exhibit the far from impartial interests of the reactionary by clearly displaying a bias in favor of poetry, or at least for those means of representation they sanction as uniquely poetic, as well as allowing poetry a greater range of trespass upon other genres than painting. Again Lessing: “The liberty to extend his description over that which preceded and that which followed the single moment represented in the work of art; and the power of showing not only what the artist shows, but also that which the artist must leave to imagination. Only
by means of this liberty and this power can the poet again raise himself to equality with
the artist” (99). Finally, Jarrell seems dangerously close to Lessing’s culturally dated
reactionism in displaying some of the gender biases underlying his notion of the relation
between the arts, which serves as the model for most ekphrases. Mitchell, for example,
suggests that by representing the painted object as female, which is by nature subject to
the greater elucidating powers of male poetic speech, and also likening “the adulterations
of the arts” to “the adulteration of every other domestic, political, and natural
distinction…Lessing has disclosed what is probably the most fundamental ideological
basis for his laws of genre, namely, the laws of gender. The decorum of the arts at bottom
has to do with proper sex roles” (Iconology 109). The conflation of Jarrell’s rather
antagonistic critical wit with his perpetual interest in women as representational objects
in his poems could also suggest that his poetry is aimed at strictly policing gender roles.

3.

I would like to suggest that this brand of iconoclasm which Jarrell himself culls
from ekphrastic tradition is not reactionary but actually quite ethically astute. First off, it
helps to see this reaction against the cult of the visual in modernist poetry as stemming
from instincts similar to those operative in the postmodern revolt against rationality as the
functional mode of epistemology in philosophy. During this time period major figures in
philosophy (one might even say anti-philosophy), such as Heidegger, Levinas, and
Adorno, were adamantly questioning the rights of rationalism to explain and organize
human knowledge. Their critiques would go on to influence the work of later
poststructuralist philosophers, especially in line with the deconstructive turn forged by
Derrida, who perceived the difficulties of initiating “a metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority” without having recourse to “the most uprooted rationalism and universalism” of the traditional logos in challenging “the violences of mysticism and history” (WD 87-88). The fundamental objection to rationalism was being waged on the antagonisms and atrocities the world was having to face during the twentieth century and many felt that the culture which professed humanist and progressive ideals but systematically and routinely objectified its human constituents had lost its claim to know truth.  

Levinas, for example, continually argued against the representational assumptions of knowledge made by the tradition of Western philosophy and urged a return to considerations of the ethical. More recently, Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that thinkers of the postmodern era have tried to “re-personalize morality;” that is, they seek to “return[ ] moral responsibility from the finishing line (to which it was exiled) to the starting point (where it is at home) of the ethical process.” Postmodern ethics is really a re-valuation of ethics in which the theoretical rigor previously used to construct and maintain the general systems of ethical behavior is applied to the practice of morals on a personal level. Because vision was frequently privileged in rationalism as the sense that provided the easiest access to truth, it became for many postmodern theorists a debunked sign of that failed tradition and all of its oppressive consequences.

In a similar manner, I argue, Jarrell sought to debunk the privilege accorded to vision in the modernist poetic tradition because it tended to distort reality by emphasizing “things” and not the actions and behaviors that defined those things in relation. Emphasizing this active and narrative quality of poetic speech he finds in the ekphrastic tradition therefore gave him the means of articulating the relational dimensions of poetry.
while correcting the dangerous swerve away from ethics he saw quite clearly in poetry like Pound’s or more symptomatically in ethically-minded poetry like Auden’s which could at times still make of human subjects objects subordinated to the “visions” of grand historical narratives. That this corrective erring on the side of the spoken rather than the seen—which is to say on the side of the dialectical relation of the spoken with the seen—demonstrates ekphrasis as a rhetorical practice of questioning the means of representation itself is apparent in the momentary collision between the narrative facility of poetry that can free the object from its static existence as merely a thing and open up the possibility of subjectivity and the ability of poetic narratives to achieve the privileged status of visions and subordinate their subjects to objective status. Recalling the “blindness to the image” I spoke of earlier, Jarrell provides us with the opportunity to explore how the ekphrastic impulse, which is fundamentally ambivalent toward the other, can be turned upon itself so as to realize within its fundamentally paragonal nature the possibility of a friendly or sisterly relationship with the other. This, of course, further encourages us to consider Jarrell’s poems, about women in particular but children as well, as not ideologically based in a desire to police and prescribe gender roles, but in the desire to use his poetry as a genuinely other-oriented vehicle to speak on behalf of those conventionally excluded from or silenced by the language of rationalism. There will be limits to Jarrell’s achievement, of course, mostly as a result of his struggles to forge a new kind of ekphrastic poem during a generation that may not have been prepared to receive it. In order to demonstrate this thesis I first offer a reading of three of Jarrell’s poems that specifically evoke the ekphrastic tradition to underscore their rhetorical endeavor. From there I attempt to map a specific poetic practice of Jarrell’s that has
proved troubling for the majority of his readers, turning to several poems in which ekphrasis is less conventionally delineated, but which I will nonetheless examine for the way in which the rhetorical practice of ek—phrasis, or speaking out, sheds light on their ethical intentions.

“The Knight, Death, and the Devil” (1951) is upon first take nothing more than a very quaint exercise in traditional ekphrasis, perhaps a kind of exercise in descriptive detail for the young poet. It is an example of what John Hollander calls “actual” ekphrasis, the representation by a work of literature of an actual, historically-verifiable piece of art, as opposed to “notional” ekphrasis, which is the representation of fictional or absent works of art. In his notes to Selected Poems, Jarrell even encourages this view by remarking quite simply that the poem “is a description of [Albrecht] Dürer’s engraving [of the same title], and the reader might enjoy comparing the details of the poem with those of the picture” (CP 4). And truly, the poem does give pleasure with its vivid details, especially when scanned alongside a copy of the engraving. The opening lines describing “Death,” with their image-rich detail, perform at once a faithful rendering and a lightly supplementary enhancement to the engraving:

Cowhorn-crowned, shockheaded, cornshuck-bearded,
Death is a scarecrow—his death’s-head a teetotum
That tilts up toward man confidentially
But trimmed with adders; ringlet-maned, rope-bridled,
The mare he rides crops herbs beside a skull.
He holds up, warning, the crossed cones of time:
Here, narrowing into now, the Past and Future
Are quicksand. (CP 21)

In almost all cases the adjectives find their literal sources in the engraving. Able to please on their own as remarkable and unusual sounds for the opening of a poem, “Cowhorn-crowned, shockheaded, cornshuck-bearded” refer to the images directly perceptible in the
original. The subtle irony implied by giving Death a “death’s head,” is merely aimed at enriching and emphasizing the obvious allegorical significance of the engraving. So is the light extravagance of the odd metaphor of “a teetotum / That tilts up toward man confidentially” aimed at underscoring the allegorical threat of death by evoking an ancient game of chance inherent in the risk of Death’s confidential look. Again adjectives stand out as readily and metrically-clunky as the allegorical symbols do in their expected and all-too-significant places (“ringlet-maned, rope-bridled”), or Jarrell glides into an easy iambic line to take in the necessary detail of a mare and skull nearly eclipsed by the “Knight’s” steed in the picture. Perhaps the most obvious poetic license occurs in the somewhat unconstrained description of the hour-glass of “man’s mortality” that the figure holds forth, but even that is only included to give due attention to the object that might most clearly occupy the Knight’s sight if his forward-marching gaze were perhaps deterred. Ostensibly, this fidelity to the engraving continues throughout the next verse paragraph, which takes as its subject the “Devil,” necessarily chastened as “A scapegoat aged into a steer…/ That leers up, joyless, vile, in meek obscenity” because the Knight has turned his back on him and gives him not even the power awarded through recognition (CP 21). The unarresting appearance of the Devil even eventuates the purely descriptive, hardly poetic, phrase which interrupts a nicely turned mirror-effect so as to draw more admiration to the engraving, rather than its textual supplement: “His pike’s claw-hammer mocks—in duplicate, inverted— / The pocked, ribbed, soaring crescent of his horn” (CP 21, emphasis added).

Although the poem seems oddly straight-forward up to this point, the subtle shift from actual ekphrasis toward notional ekphrasis, which occurs in the last two verse
paragraphs focusing on the Knight, gradually reveals the highly original use to which Jarrell puts ekphrasis in this poem. Along with the description of the Knight in the engraving are introduced elements that we might not expect to find according to the constraints so far maintained. Jarrell’s description of the dog, for instance, ushers in some language we have not had occasion to see earlier in the poem: “a sheep-dog bounding at his stirrup, / In its eyes the cast of faithfulness (our help, / Our foolish help)” (21, emphasis added). The parenthetical interpolation has no appropriate source in the engraving. Although we may read these words also according to an allegorical narrative about the frailty of relationships and the relative paucity of succor provided to humanity in the world, that reading depends on the engagement of the reading audience, the “we” invoked. Up to this point, all allegorizing had been subject to the engraving’s representation, and even though it was being newly elucidated by the poetic reading, it was still a reiteration of an allegory already understood to be present in the engraving.

When the poem turns toward the Knight and thereby realizes its true subject, however, a new limit of representation has been reached:

He listens in assurance, has no glance To spare for them, but looks past steadily At—at— a man’s look completes itself. (CP 22)

The hesitation marked by this break in speech operates as a limit between reality and representation, between truth and lie; yet, it is a double-edged limit. According to the obvious reading, “a man’s look completes itself” is a practical lie. This man’s, this knight’s, look does not complete itself, at least not in any way that pleases the “reader” of the engraving, because he then must turn “outside him,” outside the painting, to make the look fully signify: “The death of his own flesh, set up outside him; / The flesh of his own
soul, set up outside him—” (*CP* 22). All “looks,” all means of representing to oneself the reality of the world must rely on this shift to notional interpretation. In fact, Hollander argues that it is not actual, but notional ekphrasis that truly defines this rhetorical tradition. The first extant examples of ekphrasis that we have are the descriptions of the shields of Heracles and Achilles by Hesiod and Homer, the description of the ivory cup given to Thyrsis in Theocritus’ idyll, and the descriptions of Aeneas’ armor and the paintings in the temple of Juno in the *Aeneid*—all of which, strictly speaking, are examples of notional ekphrasis (Hollander 209). Instances of actual ekphrasis did not really proliferate until the modern age, concurrent with the growth of private art collections and the rise of the public museum. Nevertheless, argues Hollander, truly significant modernist examples of ekphrasis operate within the rhetorical paradigm of notional ekphrasis: “Notional ekphrasis inheres in modern poetry’s actual ekphrasis, and provides a thematic microcosm of a basic paradox about poetry and truth” (209).

What the shift outside of the engraving toward notional interpretation in “The Knight, Death, and the Devil” further reveals is that the actual ekphrasis of the first half of the poem was no more traditional and faithful to reality, perhaps even less so, than the notional “breakdown” of the latter half. The other reading is that “a man’s look [can’t help but] complete[,] itself,” as it is forever destined to be “set up outside him.” The poem ends with lines begging for this reversal:

Death and the devil, what are these to him?
His being accuses him—and yet his face is firm
In resolution, in absolute persistence;
The folds of smiling do for steadiness;
The face is its own fate—*a man must do what he must*—
And the body underneath it says: *I am.* (*CP* 22)
The figural representation of the engraving and the no less figural need to signify outside of that frame suggest that “death and the devil” are everything to man. The next line, we think, should read “His face is firm—and yet his being accuses him.” His being accuses him because he would, indeed he must, entrap the process of being, the I am, within the representational figure. This poem, by its conclusion, has revealed itself to be thoroughly caught up in a rhetorical struggle for the means of representation. Notably, however, though this conflict is clothed in the form of a traditional ekphrastic exercise, its struggling is not one of verbal pitted against visual representation, but of poetic representation considering its own limits. That Jarrell uses this additionally as a means to treat of typical human conflicts like coming to terms with aging and mortality, themes which noticeably carry over into other poems, suggests that he purposefully began to explore the ekphrastic encounter as one which could be bent toward ethical ends.

Much in this same vein, and another exemplary poem of ekphrasis in Jarrell’s canon, is “The Bronze David of Donatello” (1957), in which Jarrell pursues a narrative path less travelled to give voice to the untold story. Placed at the end of Jarrell’s 1960 volume, The Woman at the Washington Zoo, this poem is a good example of an “actual” ekphrasis, in Hollander’s terms, that thwarts the typical interpretive scheme by subtly foregoing identification with the depicted hero of the statue, which the poem’s speaker finds slightly “shameless” in its aloofness:

Centering itself upon itself, the sleek
Body with its too-large head, this green
Fruit now forever green, this offending
And efficient elegance draws subtly, supply,
Between the world and itself, a shining
Line of delimitation, demarcation.
The body mirrors itself. (CP 273-74)
Picking up the theme of self-possession, which in “The Knight, Death, and the Devil” was rhetorically predicated on a conceptual lie (the “notional” dimension of the ekphrasis), this poem forcefully denounces the abstention of the young hero. The statue’s elegance offends the viewer by being too easily beautiful and remarkable, and it even seems likely, for a moment, that the foe—the vanquished Goliath, here represented solely by the fallen head over which David displays his triumph—will be the recipient of the persona’s identification. The figure is “Strong in defeat, in death rewarded,” the persona explains, and he seems to require that we see this monster in “The new light” of his poetic description, which falls upon Goliath “As if in tenderness” (CP 274). His revisionism has a protective air about it: “The stone sunk in the forehead, say the Scriptures; / There is no stone in the forehead. The head is helmed / Or else, unguarded, perfect still” (CP 274). While “The Knight, Death, and the Devil” was obliged to maintain a fidelity to the original, this poem plays more loosely with the idea of the original. The historical original is located in the Scriptures, but the persona suggests that it is Donatello’s or, more rightly, his own depiction of Goliath that is the more veritable. Nevertheless, even the offensive virginal aloofness exhibited by David finds its counterpart in Goliath as well: “The head dreams what has destroyed it / And is untouched by its destruction” (CP 274).

What truly evokes identification from the persona is not the abstractness of art, clearly displayed through each separate figure in this sculpture, but the contingency of art, where these figures come into contact and provide the imagination with narrative fodder for representations of life. This is displayed most clearly by the persona’s adoption of an erotic rhetoric to breach the virginal separateness of the two diametric characters:
The head’s other wing (the head is bearded
And winged and helmeted and bodiless)
Grows like a swan’s wing up inside the leg;
Clothes, as the suit of a swan-maiden clothes,
The leg. The wing reaches, almost, to the rounded
Small childish buttocks. The dead wing warms the leg,
The dead wing, crushed beneath the foot, is swan’s-down. (CP 274)

The possibility for sexual interpretations of the statue, which alone in David had proven disturbing enough to the viewer to be compared with “the whore Medusa’s” and sharply banished as “sexless” (CP 273), are here thoroughly entertained. The consummate and copulative imagery contrasts sharply with the rhetorical question, “What sex has victory?,” posed earlier to stifle the question of sexuality. In actuality, the adulteration of the two opposed characters, and all the ideological associations attending the depiction of “heroes” and “villains,” reveals that such representations are always already embroiled in questions of sexuality.

The speaker’s apparent preference for the fallen monster over the accidental victor becomes, ultimately, the motive for a hyper-masculinization of Goliath and a hyper-feminization and infantalization of David. It is noteworthy that through the gendering of this conflict Jarrell has reversed traditional roles. To the victor go the spoils, every hero story from the epics to Hollywood cinema tells us, so the ideological advantage goes to the historically oppressed. Yet, Jarrell vehemently and repeatedly dissents from the tradition of the hero tale and, sympathizing with refugees and victims of atrocity, is able to claim with a twist on the beatitudes, “Blessed are those brought low” (CP 275). This revision of the new testamentary edict, “Blessed are the meek,” might find justification in the feminized David’s triumph over the marauder, but Jarrell begs pity for the fallen heroic hyper-masculine idol as well, and in the seeming violation of the
wing and leg’s embrace he subtly reinforces the gendered and sexualized play of power operative even in the reversed roles.

The volatile relation and incessant reversal of roles between the genders that the poem dramatizes is not finally resolved; rather, it is shown to be the central theme of the poem through the curious rhetorical balance of the last lines:

Upon this head
   As upon a spire, the boy David dances,
   Dances, and is exalted.
   Blessed are those brought low,
   Blessed is defeat, sleep blessed, blessed death. (CP 275)

As in the moment of erotic embrace that characterized the struggle between these figures, they are finally brought together and sharply differentiated. Rather than mobilizing gender roles, however, Jarrell here clearly suggests their difference by way of graphic lineation. Mirroring the movement of the poem’s discourse in miniature, the first lines depict the victor and the last lines the victim. (Sympathy for the defeated and the rhetorical intervention in the usual tropes deployed in the hero story perhaps advise us to set aside “hero” and “villain” for these terms, which perhaps award slight ideological advantage to the latter.) The careful placement of lines to separate them, but also hold them in suspension, however, has the effect of preserving the rival narratives. The identification with Goliath, which functions more as the effect of Jarrell’s ekphrastic projection than of the sculpture itself, does not at all diminish David’s victory, who is exalted. But neither is David’s victory allowed to hide the fact that his ascent is built “upon this head,” or that every exaltation of the low still perpetuates the bringing low of another. Through this one struggle, Jarrell is able to reveal two opposed narratives and
how they share not only in being rhetorically constructed but in specific ideological practices.

The ethical horizon of Jarrell’s more overt uses of ekphrasis is to encourage representations that can support empathy for the other while also sifting through the ideological compromises that attend the figures and narratives we construct. A late poem that foregrounds the rhetorical and ideological implications of ekphrasis precisely along these lines, but which has received little recognition for its artfulness, is “In Galleries” (1964), from 1965’s *The Lost World*.\(^{133}\) This poem focuses so centrally on the social matrix that shapes our experiences of artistic encounter and interpretation in the modern museum that the actual art referenced is rather an afterthought to the poem’s reader.\(^{134}\) We might view this as a blatant example of the practice of ekphrasis becoming so rarefied and meta-representational that its practice of interpretation becomes its own subject. Suzanne Ferguson reads the poem’s stanzas as reproducing “the traditional rhetoric of Christian progression from damnation to salvation—despair to hope to faith—to express the progression from anonymity to humanity represented in the three guards” (195). Sister Bernetta Quinn also describes a “sincere belief in Christianity” in the conversional climax of the final stanza (89). Projecting this progressive, salvific narrative onto the paradigm of ekphrasis, we might expect to find a similar progressive structure of interpretation, from ignorance to enlightenment, and tellingly each stanza is ripe for allegorization according to some common figures in the ekphrastic tradition which commonly attributes greater authority to the image than the word.

The metaphorically “blind” American guard of the first stanza resembles Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘blind painter.’ This is the abject poet whose arbitrary sign of the
word, ‘logos,’ pales in comparison to the natural sign of the image, ‘Logos’: “The guard has a right to despair. He stands by God” (CP 298). His exile from privilege is so acute that his policing of the artistic borders is like a travesty of Lessing’s reactionism. He can only disparage the enticement of the visual sign, and his nay-saying only results in his further isolation from the world he fails truly to represent. Being a mere reflection of that world effectually renders him “mute” as well as “blind”:

But the guard has no one to make him human—
They walk through him as if he were a reflection.
The guard does not see them either, you are sure,
But he notices when someone touches something
And tells him not to; otherwise he stands
Blind, silent, among the people who go by
Indistinguishably, like minutes, like the hours. (CP 298)

The guard of the second stanza, “a fountain of Italian,” is the poet who accepts the ultimate impossibility of the ekphrastic desire, but nonetheless is content to supplement the greater glory of the artwork with his effulgence of eulogistic speech. As if to allegorize the lesson for you,

exclaiming hopefully, vivaciously,
Bellissima! he shows you that in the smashed
Head of the crouching Venus the untouched lips
Are still parted hopefully, vivaciously,
In a girl’s clear smile. (CP 298)

His words (i.e., his word) of themselves are rather ineffectual next to the imperialistic presence of the artwork, but in intention they mimic the potential in the artwork to speak out “hopefully, vivaciously” to the ages even through the wrack of time. The third guard, also Italian but the abler docent of the two compatriots and infinitely abler than the “blind” and “invisible” American guard, is the poet whose art is “speaking pictures,” though not because he is with his craft translating and ameliorating the limited pictures.
He allows the “mute poetry” of painting to speak for itself and by restricting his method of explication only to the gestural and indexical, for he is literally “dumb” and “faithful” in that his explanations are entirely subject to the artistic medium they hope to describe:

When at last he takes a magnifying glass
From the shiny pocket of his uniform
And shows you that in the painting of a woman
Who holds in her arms the death of the world
The something on the man’s arm is the woman’s Tear, you and the man and the woman and the guard
Are dumbly one. You say Bellissima!
Bellissima! and give him his own rapt,
Dumb, human smile, convinced he guards
A miracle. (CP 299)

We notice that the only kind of intervention taken by the guard on behalf of the work is to focalize the viewer’s attention, which is certainly a method of framing but is not the kind of translation between mediums we associate with ekphrastic practice. In other words, the guard does not repeat or in any way reproduce the artwork for us, but allows it to disclose itself to us.136 We might say this is the poet renouncing his title of maker—his participation in the process of poesis—for that of the seer (vates), and his efforts do certainly result in a kind of miraculous conversion in the viewer. Words are still reiterative and ineffectual compared to the transmogrification the guide culls from our vision, which no longer simply sees a “dumb…rapt / Smile” on the guard’s face, but recognizes the humanity in that smile brought into worldly focus by the unifying vision of art.

Notwithstanding the salvific narrative that structures its stanzas, “In Galleries” is not as straightforward in its explication of the power of art as Ferguson and Quinn suggest. The tradition cited in this progressive narrative is basically that of ut pictura poesis, which stresses a codependence between the visual and verbal arts. As cooperative
practices (in the Renaissance they were imagined as the “Sister” arts), each medium is enlisted in the service of the other in order to fulfill the intentions and purposes of art as a mode of humanist discourse. Like mirroring discourses, they can reveal the intentions and ideals of each other through mutual enlightenment. The enlisting of this tradition lends credibility to the argument that Jarrell was fairly conservative in his views on the position of art in American culture and perhaps more rearguard in his allegiance to the humanist tradition.137 But this argument overlooks the unease with which this tradition is often cited in the poetry and Jarrell’s refusal to regard art apart from the social sphere. As W. J. T. Mitchell expresses in Iconology, no study of the image or the relation between the word and image can take place in a “pure” sense, disconnected from the ideological realm of power. “In Galleries” reveals the extent to which Jarrell shares this “single topic” with Mitchell: “the image as the site of a special power that must either be contained or exploited” (Iconology 151). Jarrell’s ambivalence toward the ut pictura poesis tradition suggests not only the limits to which he is willing to entertain a tradition that has long favored the ideological primacy of the image over the word even as it professes mutuality, but also the extent to which he makes of his poetry a space for the open interrogation of his resistance to that tradition.138 This kind of self-disclosure, I maintain, begins to serve an ethical function when it reveals the ideological underpinnings of the creative act and renews the discourse on the social value of art through the performance of its own artistic expression.
The means of registering this ambivalence as an opening onto the performative ethics of poetic expression in this poem is by way of a recurrent thematic preoccupation with economics in Jarrell’s poetry. Jarrell often employs tropes of economy in his poetry to signify his challenges to cultural systems of valuation. Beyond this rhetorical surface, however, Spargo has shown that economy, as the logic employed to regulate systems of social or cognitive representation and knowledge, occupies a constitutive position in the function of the lyric that poets such as Jarrell exploit in order to articulate ethical demurrals from those cultural systems that subsist on self-interest and the exclusion of others (see EM 83-85). Furthermore, he argues that ethics adopts a “constitutively anti-economic relation” to the moral subjectivity that conditions the thought of selfhood and that this relation bears an analogy to the limits of “the representational capabilities of the literary text” (EM 83-84). It therefore behooves us, Spargo asserts, to account for the particular ethical significance borne out by the various challenges to the functional economies of cultural identity, mourning, and lyric enacted by Jarrell’s poems.139 This more constitutive operation of economy that Spargo draws to our attention becomes particularly apparent, I would suggest, when Jarrell adopts a pecuniary rhetoric in order to hold up conventional cultural valuations for critique. The language of economy pervades Jarrell’s early poetry, especially the two collections preoccupied with World War II, Little Friend, Little Friend (1945) and Losses (1948). The editorial decision to collect a number of poems (mostly from Losses) under the heading of “The Trades” in the 1955 Selected Poems is both significant and under-representative in this regard. In three of these seven poems, the title is justified by a pun on the “trade winds,” which blow homeward news of the fate of American soldiers in the Pacific. Their fates reveal a
broad sense of categorical “losses” under the compulsion of the national war machine. The “hero” of “New Georgia” (1946), for example, faces hard compensation in death: “Who fights for his own life / Loses, loses: I have killed for my world, and am free” (CP 181). This freedom in death stands in stark relation to the lack of freedom he knew as a black American (“the bars of my cell”) in the life he died defending. Gradually this rhetoric of economy grows to encompass not just the ironies of war, but of all aspects of life caught up in this “total” battle of life against death. The race critique of these poems underscores the reflexivity of the economic as a discursive element in Jarrell’s poetry, which without fail transcends the mere tallying of deaths and trade in failed ideals and touches upon the very fabric of society and its methods of production. The outliers of this group of poems, for which the pun seems to lose its critical function, nevertheless afford the continuance of this theme. As poems they are not as successful, but they do take the “wide prospect,” applying the burden of the “fiscal outcome” of the policies of total war to large purviews of the decline of Western society as an ideal (see “1945: The Death of the Gods”) to a meditation on the suffering of the “enemy” (see “The Rising Sun”).

The editorial intrusiveness of this collection also belies the extent to which a rhetorical economy governs a greater portion of Jarrell’s poetry. Spargo has demonstrated this in his reading of the early poem “The Refugees” (1940/1942). He argues that the economic is indubitably tied up not only with a Marxian critique of culture but also with the motivating ethical function of his lyric. “[T]urning always on the thought of those whom the lyric excludes or for whom it has not yet answered,” Spargo avers, “Jarrell’s poem challenges an economics of cultural identity the lyric poem typically upholds” (51). Jarrell’s poems frequently divest themselves as “going abroad” on behalf of the other that
lies beyond the ken of the lyric subject (which is the privileged autonomy of the bourgeois subject, according to a common political assessment of the romantic poetic tradition of the lyric). This allows him to register a kind of ethical frisson which issues from the tension between a strict lyric economy of form and the cultural economies of identity (frequently manifested for Jarrell in terms of age, gender, and race). As Spargo writes, “At the very least, Jarrell’s poem[s] chart[ ] a course from an explicit, restrictive economics of form toward a set of ethical meanings arising as though in defiance of economy,” which allows Jarrell to enact of political critique of reality through the imaginative production of “rhetorical possibility” (51). From this case, in which Jarrell consciously reached out toward those excluded from the cultural economics of identity—whose fates could not yet have been historically realized but for whom Jarrell’s critique offers a compellingly prophetic defense—to much of Jarrell’s poetry in his last collection, the economic remains a persistent theme and governing trope for his language.

“In Galleries” is an explicit example of this troping that further enforces the need to reckon with the ruling economies of art, the economies of poetic form, by directly engaging the ekphrastic tradition. While even at this late stage Jarrell offers the promise of a transcendent power for art, it would be a mistake to leap with Ferguson and Quinn in total confirmation. The salvific narrative that they excavate from the poem is largely denuded by the systematic imposition of a banal economics on the encounter with the artistic sublime. In characteristic Jarrellian fashion, the first stanza is capped by a reflection on the existential pain of mortality, frequently metaphorized as trading life for life and for dreams, and eventually for that ultimate dream of life that is death. The
museum guard’s life is accounted for by the incremental payments of time and the returns of age:

[O]therwise he stands
Blind, silent, among the people who go by
Indistinguishably, like minutes, like the hours.
Slowly the days go by, the years go by
Quickly: how many minutes does it take
To make a guard’s hair uniformly gray? (CP 298)

The museum guard’s fate resembles what Jarrell famously coined as the deferred return of “yet” in another context: “And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life. / Yet…yet…/ to have one’s life add up to yet!” (see “A Girl in a Library,” CP 18). The frequent claim in Jarrell’s lyrics is that life’s demands rarely result in recompense but in the ambivalence of deferral, which is at once a hope for future restitution as well as the imaginative entertainment that things could have been otherwise. In both cases, the poems require the operative use of the ethical imagination in order to supplement the lives of the poems or imagine alternative motivating narratives for life, and with some frequency this ethical engagement leads to the formulation of political critiques as well. “In Galleries” sustains this ethico-political motive through the bathetic interjection of economical reality into the poem’s exposition of the artistic sublime. In the second stanza, the economic trope becomes monetary. This second guard’s efforts are hopeful, though practically speaking hopelessly crude, as he tries to express with the same power as the art and fails. Lacking the transformative experience of the successful ekphrasis, we nevertheless hear the guard’s words and “understand he is human, and still hopes” (CP 299). We smile cordially, nod, and do as Jarrell directs, which is only proper in this world: “You give him a dime’s worth of aluminum.” A certain demand is met with approval here by the common recognition of human interest: we give a tip because we recognize ourselves as
inhabiting a common world of exchange. Art, in this world, has no place; its sphere persists outside of our actions and beyond the articulation of our languages. But with the increased effect of art and communication in the final stanza, economy takes on a critical significance beyond this mere demonstration of courtesy and utilitarian morality. This mute guard’s indexical efforts are successful, and the minor action of explication is transformed into a sublime vision of human fraternity: “you and the man and the woman and the guard / Are dumbly one” (CP 299). The influx of art into the world creates a momentary suspension of that directive, economical language and the imaginative possibility of a unifying force beyond articulation. In

    show[ing] you that in the painting of a woman
    Who holds in her arms the death of the world
    The something on the man’s arm is the woman’s Tear,

the guard has set up for comparison with your economic moralism a diviner economy (the sacred human pathos offered in return for the savior’s gift of salvation) with the power to change your view of the world. Yet the return of Jarrell’s cool, directive voice to close this poem refuses this transcendental outlet and redirects our energies to the political sphere: “Leaving, you hand the man / A quarter’s worth of nickel and aluminum” (CP 299).

    At first glance, these closing lines may appear to be nothing short of an easy descent to irony motivated by a momentary nihilistic cruelty in the poet’s humor, in contrast to the more rigorous and potentially more rewarding vision a sustained meditation on the artistic sublime could have offered. To the contrary, I contend that this stylized welcoming of failure is actually quite essential to the realization of the poem’s ethical investment. By attending to the call of the poetic form, which in this case
demands a return to the economic refrain, Jarrell is providing his poems with the possibility of a greater political impingement upon the world of interest. The sheer incongruity between a quarter’s tip and a vision of salvation sends us back into the world armed not only with an implicit approval of this vision of the good but also with the will to see it come to fruition. The ethical vision of art presented here is definitely a difference of kind, a transformative difference. As agents in a world built upon and discursively controlled by various economies of interest and identity, we are quite often bound to inherited and prescribed means of action. This is the case as demonstrated in “In Galleries,” where despite our best efforts even our imaginative actions are still subject to these economies, whose compulsive behaviors—if you’ll excuse the triteness of the simile—keep turning up like a bad penny. The action we are allowed in the poem, giving a quarter instead of a dime, is not a difference in kind, but in degree. The implication is that the economies we submit to are not the kind necessary to the realization of our imagined goods, or that the worlds we inhabit are as yet unable to sustain such imaginative economies. Whichever the case may be, the solution, as Jarrell’s poetry demonstrates, is not to retreat totally to the extremes of utopian imagination, but to embrace failure as the condition necessary for the identification and redress of wrongs. Despite the inefficacy and disappointment that we sense at the end of “In Galleries,” we still admit that the gift of “nickel and aluminum,” albeit not a difference in kind, is yet a difference and the initial step toward ethical involvement in the world. We might envision Jarrell’s poetics, therefore, as progressing along the frontier of failure, continually butting up against the limits of lyric poetry’s use for the world of action while simultaneously building up a critical rhetoric that in questioning the value of poetic expression actually
paves the road, by way of its ethical labor, to a greater political efficacy for poetry in the twentieth century.

5.

As a means of concluding this chapter, I want to offer a brief survey and practical explication of a particular type of Jarrell poem that has caused no lack of consternation. Readers have long noted Jarrell’s engagement with the poetic tradition of the dramatic monologue and, if they have not been reserved in their praise because of his expression of “semi-feminine” sensibilities and his penchant for sentimentalism, they have most often admired his poetry written in this vein. More recently, Charlotte H. Beck has devoted her study, *Worlds and Lives*, to Jarrell’s dramatic poetry, in particular his kinds of dramatic monologues. She perceptively asserts that in order to encompass “the tangential relationship of worlds and lives” that structures his poetry, Jarrell develops a “mosaic of style” (4). Moreover, Beck’s inclination to view his stylistics as an interrogation of the dramatic poetic tradition and, more specifically, of the modern use of dramatic monologue is essentially correct. However, much of her effort is spent in trying to make Jarrell’s poems conform to a notion of dramatic poetry that he was obviously reacting against. My departure from Beck hinges upon the interpretation of a very specific moment in Jarrell’s essay “The Obscurity of the Poet”:

How our poetry got this way [i.e., too difficult]—how romanticism was purified and exaggerated and “corrected” into modernism; how poets carried all possible tendencies to their limits, with more than scientific zeal; how the dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm of poetry, now became in one form or another the norm; how poet and public stared at each other with righteous indignation, till the poet said, “Since you won’t read me, I’ll
make sure you can’t”—is one of the most complicated and interesting stories. (P&A 12-13)

In contrast to this rhetoric of dissent, Beck prefers to note how Jarrell was himself implicated in the production of this “story.” “Despite the tone of this apparent protest,” she writes, “he indicated in interviews, lectures, reviews, and essays that he favored this new norm in poetry; but more importantly, he demonstrated his preference for the dramatic in his own poetry” (Beck 9). While I certainly agree that Jarrell is implicated by his participation in the modernist cult of obscurity if not merely by the fact of the inheritance poets of his generation had to bear, I do think it unwise to overlook the ambivalence underlying this rhetorical corrective. This ambivalence belies a genuine unease with much of the “dramatic” tradition of modernist poetry, and failure to recognize this results in the misapprehension of Jarrell’s poetry or in many cases in the lack of interpretive schema. To be clear, my view of Jarrell’s dramatic poetry is not all that different from Beck’s. I agree that Jarrell’s poetry demands a different kind of reading, one that not only addresses the dramatic scene (the speaker, the audience, and the situation) but also the way in which these interact as a dynamic conceptualization, or gestalt (Beck 9). And we seem in principle to agree that Jarrell’s dramatic poetry is rarely distinguished by strict adherence to generic conventions: “In a sense Jarrell’s dramatic monologues bring together the interior monologue and the extended lyric, leaving out for the most part the Browningesque monologue with its listener” (Beck 9-10). But Beck seems unnecessarily beholden to the notion that Jarrell’s poetry must and should be classified according to a “dramatic” paradigm. This leads her to reduce his production to misleading categories, the largest being the “dramatic monologue,” with its four typical speakers (soldier, woman, child, and observer), and the others being
“dialogue” and “scene,” which in various ways serve as repositories for the unclassifiable. Rather than forcing ourselves to the only logical, and fatalistic conclusion in reading so many poems that repeatedly resist dramatic generic conventions—that Jarrell’s dramatic poems are failures—ought we not allow them the freedom to challenge our notions about dramatic poetry and the space to signify conceptual functions other than those such poetry is supposed to serve? Doing so, I suggest, allows us to begin to recuperate from the formal failures of these poems an ethical health, one that is nourished by critical questioning of the self-interestedness of dramatic poetry and the receptivity to otherness.

A brief survey of challenging moments and interpretative problems from the quintessentially Jarrellian poem—the problematic “dramatic monologue”—will help to elucidate this goal:

Meanwhile Tatyana
Larina…
Asks smiling: “But what is she dreaming of, fat thing?”
I answer: She’s not fat. She isn’t dreaming.
She purrs or laps or runs, all in her sleep;
Believes, awake, that she is beautiful;
She never dreams.

Those sunrise-colored clouds
Around man’s head—that inconceivable enchantment
From which, at sunset, we come back to life
To find our graves dug, families dead, selves dying:
Of all this, Tanya, she is innocent. (CP 17)

“A Girl in a Library” (1951), the poem which opens Jarrell’s Selected Poems, offers up a young undergraduate girl falling asleep over her studies in a college library as the scene for our contemplation. Our contemplation, however, is framed or mediated by the consciousness of a poetic observer. We encounter this as a “dramatic” poem because of the extent to which this intermediary poetic observer vies for representative control over
the girl, like the Duke of Ferrara in Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” But there is no count’s emissary to listen, nor does the observer speak. Seemingly arbitrarily, the observer projects a caricature of the heroine of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as his imagined interlocutor.

What is the purpose, we might well ask, of Jarrell’s idiosyncratic departure from the conventions of dramatic monologue?

> You have played too long today.
> Open your eyes, Lady.
> Is it a dream
> Like the ones your mother use to talk away
> When you were little and thought dreams were real?
> Here dreams are real.
> There are no more dreams, no more real—
> There is no more night, there is no more day. (*CP* 25)

In “Lady Bates” (1948), some undisclosed observer speaks about and even to the haunting presence of a young black girl who has died of some mysterious violence. It has been suggested that this poem is an ironic reversal of John Crowe Ransom’s elegy “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,”¹⁴⁵ but why does Jarrell pass over the traditional conventions of the elegy by addressing the girl, not the mourning world? And what rhetorical choices compel the tonal oscillations between gentle, childish irreverence and sadistic mockery in this poem?

> The lives are fed
> Into the darkness of their victory;
> The ships sink, forgotten; and the sea
> Blazes to darkness: the unsearchable
> Death of the lives lies dark upon the life
> That, bought by death, the loved and tortured lives,
> Stares westward, passive, to the blackening sea.
> In the tables of the dead, in the unopened almanac,
> The head, charred, featureless—the unknown mean—
> Is thrust from the waters like a flame, is torn
> From its last being with the bestial cry
Of its pure agony. O death of all my life, 
Because of you, because of you, I have not died, 
By your death I have lived. *(CP 159-60)*

A pilot’s wife struggles with the agonizing death of her husband at sea and her subsequent abandonment to widowhood in “Burning the Letters” (1945). Wartime letters, which distort her memories of him, lead her torturously to reconstruct his demise in her imagination. How could she represent the death which she could not possibly have witnessed without the result seeming masochistic fantasy? Is this poetic discourse, which is characterized by linguistic contortion and semantic dissipation, a true speech of despair and grief or rather a “deafening organ-peal of the pseudo-profound”?¹⁴⁶

As I have already suggested the hope of forging a means of answering such problematic questions requires giving up some ground on the question of dramatic poetry. T. S. Eliot misleads us when he so easily distinguishes between the three voices of poetry:

> The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. *(On Poetry 89)*

Each of these categorical divisions is necessarily problematic in how they are applied. That the first voice cannot possibly encompass the communicative function of lyric is apparent through the dramatic inflection that so many modernists gave their lyric poetry; however, in practice that is precisely how Eliot’s lecture directs application. He has to engage in some elaborate maneuvering in order to uphold these distinctions, especially when faced with the “dramatic element.” Eliot defines the “dramatic” in poetry as verse
that is constrained by the object of characterization. If it is not directed solely toward the production of character then it is not, strictly speaking, “dramatic” poetry. The dramatic monologue, therefore, is dismissed as dramatic poetry because in it we do not hear the voice of a character but “the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or of one out of fiction” (On Poetry 95). The dramatic monologue is really an instance of the poet speaking to an audience.

Does this mean that Jarrell was writing in the second voice? I don’t think so. We have already seen how this notion of the second voice, or choral poetry, proved problematic for Auden. In order to write an ethically viable public poetry, one has to imagine avoiding the imposition of the egotistical consciousness through representation while attempting not to occlude or otherwise violate the other, the “you” being addressed. Jarrell remained skeptical of this option because of the moralism and complicity with violence it seemed to evoke in Auden’s poetry. Instead, we might imagine Jarrell as occupying a voice of the “second” or “middle” position spanning what Eliot calls the “abyss” between the first and third voice (On Poetry 94). If the first voice represents the literal “monologism” of a voice that seeks only its own fulfillment and does not abide the other; and the third voice represents the extreme limits of poetic sympathy for the character and the exhaustion of the poetic personality; Jarrell’s poetry spans the great divide in order to find formal possibilities for accommodating these two voices. Jarrell’s voice may be, in this sense, a poetics of the possibility of speech, of direct commerce with another. From this viewpoint, all of those aspects of Jarrell’s “dramatic” poetry which present themselves as failures may indeed serve as the traces of an ethical attempt to keep an open discourse between the self and the other. In “A Girl in a Library,” for
example, we experience some amount of discomfort over the presumptuous tone initially taken by the poetic observer. The opening description of the girl—“This broad low strong-boned brow; these heavy eyes; / These calves, grown muscular with certainties; / This nose, three medium-sized pink strawberries” (CP 15)—with its classifying logic and ideologically-laden observations reads a lot like ethnographic texts from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that we now read primarily as texts that seek to reduce the mysteries and threats of otherness to cultural “facts,” which can be easily determined and managed by the autonomous and self-aware observer. The difference, however, is that Jarrell’s observers are and gradually become more self-conscious about the self-interested nature of their observances. When the observer notes, “This is a waist the spirit breaks its arm on” (CP 15), he is discovering the limits of his own power and perhaps the possibility of a greater truth through those limits. The poet’s declaration may manifest itself in the text as a conscious means of controlling and policing the object, but it issues from a deeper, less conscious realization that he is helpless, “disarmed,” before this other who resists reduction to objectivity.

It is this realization that Jarrell often attempts to make more conscious in his poems and that by way of what we might call a proliferation of consciousness. Ambivalence toward this girl—his desire for representational or even corporal (one must not overlook the romantic or erotic element of this poem) control over her coupled with his need to find a respectful distance from her and to let her be the subject his own consciousness might seek to inhibit—is first gauged in the poem by a split in the observer’s consciousness. A dialogic interrogation of his own motives and representations of the girl gradually enters the poem, producing a heathered text. The
dominant mode of clinical observation—“As I look, the world contracts around you”—is subtly changed by a gradual release of control over variables. Moments of response, like a sympathetic consciousness has begun to form itself in relation to the girl, begin to appear throughout the text: “But I exaggerate;” “Yet for all I know.” To the representative impulse to liken her to an “orangoutang [sic]” knitting its brows, a parenthetical corrective addresses itself: “(But not so sadly; not so thoughtfully)” (CP 16). The presence of simultaneous yet widely divergent motives is directly exhibited in this dialogic insertion. If at first this stuttering strikes the reader as a peculiar indulgence that weakens the poem’s authority and seems designed to excuse a lack of focus in the language, might we not entertain the possibility that this is to an extent intended by Jarrell? It is precisely the point that the poem has become less directive. To return to Eliot’s language, the poem is attempting to sustain both the meditative poetic subjectivity of the first voice and the supreme sympathy of the other-driven third voice, while also attempting to stave off the dissimulation that attends the dramatic monologue.

The invocation of Tatyana Larina is yet another moment designed to put the reader at a loss. But if we accept the condition of being at a loss and relinquish some of the control we expect to gain from the dramatic poem, then we can begin to see Larina’s function. At the moment that she is introduced, Jarrell is basically projecting one pole of his consciousness (i.e., that part that would attempt to dominate via reduction) onto her and imposing himself, as a shield of consciousness, between this girl and her readers. This protective indulgence also imposes itself between us, as readers, and the girl. As Jarrell argues back on his study’s behalf, he is trying also to induce in us the split of consciousness that leads to an interrogation of motives. In the other two examples I
provided earlier, we can begin to discern a similar poetics. Systematically, Jarrell loosens the constraints of the dramatic situation, not to direct the scene but to encourage an open discourse between the perceiving subject and its other. “Lady Bates,” therefore, also makes use of various personifications as projections of the various motives for representing the young, black girl. These projections then act as the possible ways of responding to her death and interceding on her behalf. The tonal qualities of the language, as I also mentioned, make up a mixed “texture” of speech which perhaps tries to approximate a speech that would be familiar to the girl herself. “Burning the Letters” is perhaps one of Jarrell’s best early examples of this attempt to mix speech, as the texture of that poem images forth the dialogic encounter between Life and Death through the figures of the widow and her dead husband.

Interceding on behalf of the other recurs throughout Jarrell’s poetry, particularly in the many problematically “dramatic” poems he wrote later in his career such as, to name only a few, “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” “The End of the Rainbow,” “Next Day,” “A Well-to-Do Invalid,” “Gleaning,” and “The Player Piano.” Auden had eventually to abandon the sacrificial victim to his fate because of his faith in the community, but not without first acknowledging universal participation in the sacrificial institution. It was his belief that this acknowledgment could foster an ethical drive to substitute oneself for the other and to disrupt those historical narratives which did not account for responsibility. Jarrell, as we have seen, held a much lower opinion of the community as it appeared to him through the war. Furthermore, he remained attentive to the limits of Auden’s sacrificial poetics and dedicated much of his poetry to correcting what he saw as an oversight of the victim in modernist poetry. This is not to say that
Jarrell’s poetry solves the problems of modernism or avoids its own unethical implications. As Spargo has noted, Jarrell’s corrective poetry often addresses itself retroactively; that is, it signifies as a corrective for us by operating under the sign of “political futility” or by invoking a “bad conscience” to impel future action. Furthermore, Jarrell’s ethically motivated protective indulgence also raises a number of difficulties for readers. When women readers like Elizabeth Bishop are unable to find any ground for recognition in Jarrell’s women personae, then we have to consider that his protective indulgence may not always be free of its own representational motives or aimed primarily at preserving the integrity of the other. Nevertheless, Jarrell’s poetry is demonstrative of the kind of rhetorically motivated poetic self-consciousness that gains singular impetus through the modern ekphrastic tradition and addresses itself as such to the most pressing ethical question of mid-twentieth century culture—specifically, whether art can begin to restore the integrity of the human subject which has been beset by socio-political violations and philosophical interrogations to the point that the very construct of humanity through which we articulate our subjectivity has been drawn into question.
Concluding this study with a chapter on Elizabeth Bishop may at first appear odd. One principal reason for this is the persistence of a longstanding and largely misleading anti-rhetorical streak in the critical reception of Bishop’s work, which can be traced back to the initial responses to her debut collection, *North & South* (1946). Indeed, it is remarkable how assuredly and unanimously her poetry was singled out from the beginning as antithetical to the “rhetorical” verse her contemporaries often depreciated or dismissed. Her reviewers breathed deeply of her authenticity and clarity. Louise Bogan praised Bishop’s poems as “not in the least showy. They strike no attitudes and have not an ounce of superfluous emotional weight….‖ Oscar Williams, who still professed to find in the collection a penchant for the fashionable, nevertheless admired the “fresh unostentation” of *North & South*, while Robert Lowell found the poems “unrhetorical, cool, and beautifully thought out.” Even Bishop’s most careful readers at the time approved this characterization of the poet, failing to acknowledge the consequences that such an easy identification of the poems with their author might bring about in the future appreciation of “Miss Bishop.” Marianne Moore wrote, “Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular. Why has no one ever thought of this, one asks oneself; why not be accurate and modest?” Randall Jarrell concurred, citing that “Miss Bishop’s poems are never forced: in her best work restraint, calm, and proportion are implicit in every detail of organization and workmanship.” Resounding accolades of this nature were responsible for propping up the popular image of “Miss Bishop,” the self-effacing, agenda-less woman poet—Bishop’s femininity was constantly reiterated and
overdetermined by her readers—who forgoes the grand ambitions and stylistics of her male progenitors and peers in favor of a quietly modest aesthetics of keen observation and a faithful commitment to sociable manners. And it was this image that scholars instrumental in the resuscitation of Bishop’s critical reputation in the 1980s and 90s had to struggle against, for they justly believed that only through a critical reassessment of this image might we be able to recover a more deeply engaged poetics from her work; i.e., a critical poetics of political, sexual, and racial consciousness.  

Sympathetic to this endeavor, I propose that we reevaluate Bishop’s poetry starting with that initial critical effacement of the rhetorical. In all of these early reviews we observe the development of a uniquely negative or negating rhetoric that, taken in aggregate, still colors how we read her poems today. Consider how the repeated use of negative or abstentious characterizations in these reviews—unostentatious, unassuming, unspectacular, etc.—emphasizes a positive gain in emotional or moral weight in the poetry. Such repeated non-demonstration renders Lowell’s adjective, “unrhetorical,” particularly insightful; however, the efficacy of this term depends largely on the extent to which we can use it not as a mere descriptor for lines purged and sanitized of their aesthetic force. One must still hear, we might say, the reverberation of rhetoric within the very term that would negate it. Although Moore and Jarrell avoid overt discussions of the rhetorical in Bishop’s poetry, they nevertheless underscore there a productive splitting of rhetorical functions, and each of them, significantly, attributes this to a moral purpose. Moore discerns in North & South a “beautifully formulated aesthetic-moral mathematics” and she draws an analogy between Bishop’s careful craftsmanship and religious vocation: “With poetry as with homiletics, tentativeness can be more positive than positiveness;
and in *North & South*, a much instructed persuasiveness is emphasized by uninsistence” (179). Again, we have another example of that negative/ing critical characterization—“uninsistence”—but its force is superabundantly positive. The true insight here, however, is that while Bishop’s non-demonstrative method may appear anti-rhetorical, its result, “a much instructed persuasiveness,” is effectively rhetorical. It is precisely Bishop’s “uninsistence,” her tendency to give over moralizing in favor of a descriptive immediacy, which leads us often to be “instructed” by the thought processes provoked by her poems. “At last we have someone who knows, who is not didactic,” touts Moore (179). What Moore praises in Bishop’s poetry is the operation of a demonstrable force even at the moment when the poet relinquishes the methods associated with demonstration. Jarrell also points to a similarly candid and unprepossessing rhetorical effectiveness in the poems: “Instead of crying, with justice, ‘This is a world in which no one can get along,’ Miss Bishop’s poems show that it is barely but perfectly possible—has been, that is, for her. Her work is unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity—and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*” (*PA* 235). Like Moore, Jarrell praises Bishop’s ability to display moral rectitude while forgoing the more compulsive forms of didactic demonstration. The attractiveness of such poetry in the post-war world, he avers, is that it enhances our understanding of personal responsibility, while also being attentive to the difficulties of maintaining and acting on that responsibility in a fallen world scrambling to find its balance; Bishop’s poems demonstrate “that morality, for the individual, is usually a small, personal, statistical, but heartbreaking or heartwarming affair of omissions and commissions the
greatest of which will seem infinitesimal, ludicrously beneath notice, to those who govern, rationalize, and deplore” (PA 235).

Of course, we see clearly in hindsight that this praise confined our understanding of Bishop to methods that only function within the carefully conscribed interstices of poetic discourse, as if her only effective option for an ethical or political intervention into the course of late modernist poetry were to chastely demur from the “official” efforts of her masculine counterparts, from which vantage point she could, at best, merely disrupt conventions without being dismissed to the margins. So, according to the officially sanctioned critical position on Bishop, which Adrienne Rich makes abundantly clear in her appraisal of the poet in Blood, Bread, and Poetry, Bishop’s refusal to engage with differences of gender and sexuality as a poet renders her ill-equipped to serve any oppositional, feminist ends. Even though Bishop late in life publicly stated that “I’ve always considered myself a strong feminist,” she consistently refused to acknowledge or be acknowledged as a member of any kind of women’s poetic tradition,¹⁵³ which made her appear to poets such as Rich as complicit in the dismissive attitudes of the patriarchal tradition toward poetry by women. Recognizing perhaps the equally reductive danger in Rich’s definition of an “oppositional” feminist poetics, several critics have attempted to reassess the critical potential of Bishop’s feminism from within the dominant poetic tradition. Such attempts are most successful to the extent that they account for the ethical and political deliberations that inform Bishop’s rhetorical self-awareness, most particularly in their attention to the poetic technique we have come to associate with Bishop—the subtle revision of closed, authorial forms through the use of descriptive and non-directive idioms.¹⁵⁴
My hope, then, is to follow these others into this difficult critical territory by reexamining how Bishop’s poetry, which is only nominally anti-rhetorical, seeks to recoup, paradoxically, “the sense of difference” Rich is after—with the difference, however, that Bishop views poetry not solely as the “struggle for self-definition.” In fact, Bishop quite adamantly opposes the insistently “confessional” personalism of many of her late modernist contemporaries. Rather, as a woman who for most of her life struggled with personal loss, displacement, and self-doubt, Bishop often experienced the struggle for self-definition as a precarious negotiation of a nexus of forces—gender, but also race, sexuality, and nationalism. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the closing lines, attributed to a mere “traveller,” of the title poem in her collection *Questions of Travel* (1965):

[“]Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there...No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be? “155

Here we might expect Bishop, a perpetual traveler herself, to reveal her acquired knowledge of identity and belonging, but she instead thwarts this temptation, leaving us with only another question and a perpetually-open idea of self, which is beset by the constraints of the territories to which she can lay no claim. In doing so, Bishop is not simply thrusting her own lived experiences upon the reader, but creating a way of thinking about selfhood, pulled or even warped as it is by these forces, as fundamentally vagrant and as composed of fictions that can be only tenuously sustained. What has perhaps most confounded Rich and so many other readers in this search for the poet’s self-definition is that, almost without fail in Bishop’s poetry, identity is expressed interrogatively and, therefore, by means of other voices as much as her own.156
Surprisingly, Bishop does not often adopt the rhetorical strategy of the dramatic monologue; rarely does she insist on the utter opacity of her life in reading the poetry, and most of her poems can be attributed to certain experiences and thoughts that we may glean from her biography. She opts instead to begin with observational motives, which may in their inception be personal but are then gradually opened to interrogation, disruption, revision, or exemplification through the incursion of other rhetorical perspectives, frames, or motives. Instead of rendering unavailable any meaningful notion of difference, as Rich famously charges, Bishop’s technique endows the poetry with its remarkably ethical and (ultimately, I will argue) political weight. In situating her at the end of my study I mean to qualifiedly endorse Harold Bloom’s suggestion that Bishop’s rhetorical acuity exceeds that of many of her contemporaries; another way of saying this, perhaps, is that among the poets I consider in this dissertation Bishop is the most disposed to successfully turning poetics to the task of thinking politically about otherness.

1.

A prevalence of overinvested rhetorical strategies is evident even in Bishop’s first volume where they had been discounted by most of her early critics. Any careful reading of North & South (1946) cannot fail to note the consistency with which Bishop employs rhetorical strategies to cultivate the multiplication of perspective. “The Map” (1935), Bishop’s stunning announcement of arrival, operates nearly like a manifesto in its movement from the declarative to unsettling interrogative:

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, 

drawing it unperturbed around itself? 

Along the fine tan sandy shelf 
is the land tugging at the sea from under? (CP 3)

Through its adoration of maps, the poem supersedes the horizons of terrestrial rootedness to glimpse totality. Maps bring within our reach the disparate realities of the world, to be “stroke[d],” “cage[d],” classified and “take[n]…between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods” (CP 3). But as the poem also reveals, maps are distorted—“as when emotion too far exceeds its cause”—and distorting. They encourage us to imagine the world as we know it not to be: “Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, / lending the land their waves’ own conformation” (CP 3). The poem ends with a quiet confidence that “Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West. / More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors” (CP 3). Even as the topographer retains biases to encompass the world precisely, she suffers a loss in the ability to discern between differences and focus our emotions. The self-containment of “the map” that is the poem itself undergoes a transformation under the pressure of these questions and hesitations: it operates less as a key for measuring the world than as a delineation of the subtle, ever-shifting problems Bishop means for her poems to address.

For the reader, this constant shifting can be initially frustrating. But Bishop’s commitment to creating a poetics in the interrogative mode is such that her critical reputation may justifiably be staked on the poetry’s hospitality to a variety of reading strategies. The poems’ obliquity makes it sometimes difficult to find solid ground, but their commitment to extracting a personal truth from the melee of possibilities all but embodies the reader as someone who is there in the process of thinking it through. Developing a poetics that could “portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking” was a goal
Bishop set herself early on and one she continued to address throughout her career. Her ability to realize this goal in her first volume can be illustrated through two key critical reflections on the goals of art. In “The Imaginary Iceberg” (1935), Bishop seems momentarily to consider the virtues of a self-contained, self-referential art, which we associate with the aesthetic values of l’art pour l’art, or symbolism, or imagism. The iceberg is a thing in itself:

This iceberg cuts its facets from within.  
Like jewelry from a grave  
it saves itself perpetually and adorns  
only itself, perhaps the snows  
which so surprise us lying on the sea. (CP 4)

She marvels at the iceberg’s ability to remain so self-contained, surely emblematic of the arctic scene, yet infinitely apart from it. It is the most precious jewel, utterly devoid of use-value. A thing of the “grave,” perhaps, but resurrected: graven after its own image.

To the speaker it is quite self-evident, “We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship” (CP 4). But despite one’s keen desire to reach the “glassy pinnacles” of an aesthetic ideal unto itself, the iceberg is incapable of rendering payment of any kind. It cannot express our deepest wishes or reflect our “surprise;” its truth is not our own: “This is a scene where he who treads the boards / is artlessly rhetorical” (CP 4). In her failure to engage this sublime apparition, Bishop encourages her readers also to turn away and seek a language more accommodating to the itinerant soul:

Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off  
where waves give in to one another’s waves  
and clouds run in a warmer sky.  
Icebergs behoove the soul  
(both being self-made from elements least visible)  
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible. (CP 4)
The irony of the closing lines, of course, is that the iceberg was not at all susceptible to anthropomorphism; it can only be imagined in human terms once we have turned back upon ourselves and the company we keep in warmer climates, “where waves give in to one another’s waves.” We can understand why Bishop, known for her reticence on matters pertaining to her personal life and her intense dislike for strictly confessional poetry, would find the semblance between the iceberg and soul “behooving,” or why she might therefore find an aesthetics that sought to keep them “self-made” and “least visible” attractive; yet, she chooses instead to return to a communal and visible poetics.

“This is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for,” Bishop expostulates in the second stanza, supposing perhaps like Paul to regain a transcendent vision from the iceberg’s imaginary ideal. Ultimately, however, this aesthetic ideal only “stands and stares,” a mute bedazzlement to which Bishop implores her readers to say farewell.

This move does not suggest that Bishop found the sanctity of the soul depreciated, but instead that she found a properly-oriented rhetoric, artfully employed, better for meeting the needs of her mid-century readers, who—beset by the atmospheric pressures of increased militarization, national political antagonism, and forced itinerancy—were not always comfortably-“fleshed,” not always “fair,” and certainly not always “erected indivisible.” Something more representative of what I believe her aesthetic goals were to become is expressed forcefully at the end of “The Monument”:

But roughly but adequately it [the object] can shelter what is within (which after all cannot have been intended to be seen). It is the beginning of a painting, a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument, and all of wood. Watch it closely. (CP 25)
The aesthetic ideal here is considerably more rough-shod and materialist, but also more responsive to interrogation by readers. Whereas the speaker of “The Imaginary Iceberg” had found herself to be “artlessly rhetorical” in describing the iceberg in its arctic surrounds, this speaker is more self-consciously rhetorical. She describes “the monument” in order to solicit response rather than to quell it—a fact borne out by the intrusion of several ventriloquized readerly responses throughout the poem. And, notably, the more demonstrably the speaker tries to idealize the monument as the “melancholy or romantic” work of an “artist-prince,” the more resistant become these readerly interjections:

[“]What is that?”
  It is the monument.

“Why did you bring me here to see it?
I am tired of breathing this eroded air,
this dryness in which the monument is cracking.” (CP 24)

Despite these disparaging responses, however, Bishop continues to hold forth on the monument as an aesthetic potentiality worth fulfilling. It is merely “an object” after all—and the object’s not the thing—but nonetheless an object that can be drawn to human purpose: “yet those decorations, / carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all, / give it away as having life” (CP 24). The monument is not self-contained but prolific, and, therefore, eminently more practical in its ability to sustain human integrity by acting as surrogate for actions like “wishing,” “wanting,” “cherish[ing] something,” and “‘commemorat[ing].’” Most of all it is changing, in process, and reactive—not an end in itself, but “the beginning” of an aesthetic performance. When Bishop admonishes us to
“watch it closely,” we begin to understand that what we are watching is our own process of thinking opened up to interrogation and revision.

The majority of poems in *North & South* display a rhetorical openness to questioning that depends on the multiplication of frames and perspectives through which the reader is made to sift and then hone her critical discernment, often with vertiginous or humbling results. One thinks, for example, of “The Unbeliever,” in which one must maneuver the shifting levels of the sea, the mast, the gull, and the cloud at the peril of demise; of “Cirque d’Hiver,” in which one weighs the imaginative possibilities of the mechanical horse and the tiny dancer atop his back before being thrown stoically back upon one’s own desires; of “The Fish,” in which one shifts perspectives from the fisher’s victorious rainbowed pride to the hard-driven existence of the catch and back again; or of the numerous tropes of mirrors and windows that refract and upend our visions in the oneiric logics of sleep, awakening, and drunkenness throughout the volume. In this first book, Bishop is attempting to disrupt our frames of reference and the opacity of our perceptions. These tactics result in a densely rhetorical structure but they also provide the reader with an experience of depth that is otherwise rare in poetry. Peggy Samuels’ recent critical endeavors go a long way in demonstrating how Bishop accomplishes this sense of depth in her poetry, thereby making it more experientially viable for her readers. In her reading, the prevalence of tropes like mirrors, glass, fields, nets, lines, and fabrics in Bishops’ poems adds up to a concentrated program of rendering the interface between poetry and reality, the “membrane” between the mind and the world, increasingly “porous, transparent, and extensive [so] that it no longer bounds in the usual way.”159 The “problem of depth” became a central poetic concern for Bishop, Samuels avers, because
of her indebtedness to Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. In fact, acting as Bishop’s mentor, Moore directly encouraged her protégé to seek out solutions to this problem in a 1938 letter: “I can’t help wishing you would sometime in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience; or since no one admits profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable” (qtd in Verse 307). Moore clarifies in this letter that this risk she wishes Bishop to take is not simply aesthetic, but ethical as well; it is the risky endeavor of bringing poetry out of its self-contained idealism and back into the realm of socially-motivated responsibility, an endeavor that many artists were, at the time of political mobilization and mass antagonism and armament leading up to the second world war, beginning to view as necessary. There is yet every indication that Bishop took this ethical challenge seriously and crafted her early poetry to meet it, despite the fact that she worried a great deal whether her first volume would be received as quietist and, consequently, wrote an overly-defensive disclaimer to justify her lack of “political” or “war-time” poems and asked her editor to include it in the publication of North & South.¹⁶⁰

What is perhaps most remarkable about Bishop’s response is that, rather than turn to public discourses of political or ethical obligation or take inspiration from existing political poetic models in order to find the appropriate rhetorical register for her responsible poetry, she instead scrutinized the visual arts, extensively adapting her techniques from the world of painting. Samuels quite nicely expresses how this unforeseen method allows Bishop to create a personalized poetry that does not result in egotism or escapism but in “open fields” of perspective:

Ultimately, Bishop’s sense of an “I” comes closest to the mobility of visual art’s staging of an event in which an object appears in a field that
did not contain it before but that immediately rearranges itself, opening, to hold it. The self is not the center of that occurrence. The “I” is itself a kind of field, the borders of which are continuously altered by occurrences outside its bounds. (Deep Skin 24)

It is through art, then, that Bishop was able to find a justification for her rhetorical experiments in observation. She began to explore how observation need not be grounded by a single, stationary perceiving consciousness, but can also operate through a mobile field of shifting perspectives that can diverge, coincide, modulate, or transform. Rhetorically, this opens the field to the exploration of not only an “I,” which is decentralized and thus open to the incursion of others’ speech, but also to various “you”s and “we”s or altogether “other” voices.

The value of Samuels’ analysis is that it reorients our approach to Bishop with respect to her central preoccupation with inter-artistic exchange. Unlike Randall Jarrell, who quite publicly expressed his views of art in a number of critical essays and then later drew upon this interest to expand the horizons of his poetry, Bishop never publicly declared her affinity for the visual arts, even though it had been a cornerstone of her aesthetic philosophy from the beginning, for fear that she might leave herself open to charges of polemicism or opportunism. In fact, it was Jarrell who finally made the public comparison of Bishop’s poetry to painting in a 1955 review for Harper’s:

And I don’t know of any other poet with so high a proportion of good poems: at least half are completely realized works of art…[E]ven their most complicated or troubled or imaginative effects seem, always, personal and natural, and as unmistakable as the first few notes of a Mahler song, the first few patches of a Vuillard interior. (The poems are like Vuillard or even, sometimes, Vermeer.) [KA&C 245]
Finding that “the best critic of poetry” had discovered and understood this central aspect of her aesthetic philosophy, Bishop was elated. She wrote to express her gratitude at having found a sympathetic compeer in her goals:

> Sometimes I have the odd sensation that I am writing solely for you…I still, from the bottom of my heart, honestly think I do NOT deserve it [Jarrell’s consistent praise]—but it has been one of my dreams that someday someone would think of Vermeer, without my saying it first, so now I think I can die in a fairly peaceful frame of mind, any old time, having struck the best critic of poetry going that way. (OA 312)

To underscore how important the arts as a whole enterprise were to her, it is important to remember that Bishop had a difficult time defining herself as a poet. Her interests led her to flirt at various times in her development with music, prose, and painting as alternative means of expression. It was Marianne Moore who effectively “recruited” Bishop and claimed her for poetry, thankfully, although Bishop continued to dabble in her other artistic interests. We might say now that the success of her poetry is in large part defined by the sublimation of these, at times, competing artistic drives, and for that very reason we should bring these artistic exchanges into the foreground of our analyses.

The publication of *Exchanging Hats* (1996), a small collection of Bishop’s watercolor and gouache paintings, is one humble attempt at accomplishing this reorientation. William Benton’s insightful introduction to this collection is appropriately frank about the modest and imperfect accomplishments of Bishop’s poorly executed paintings. He suggests that they suffer from a relative lack in the transversal of values that her poetry so often achieves, but that this should not lead us to exclude them from the realm of art. Whereas the poetry displays “a process whose order and intensity penetrates the matrix of life,” Benton explains, the paintings do not support the transition back to life; rather than the paintings entering life, “her life entered them” (Benton xviii). They
are not excluded from our purview, however, because they stand as visual alternatives to what Bishop hoped to achieve through words. Their slap-dash methods of composition and perspective serve as instructional models for how to go about forging a poetics that can reach back into life. The paintings, therefore, can serve as lenses for better understanding Bishop’s deliberate and multi-staged conception of artistic craft. In his review of *Exchanging Hats*, David C. Ward asserts that “[t]he paintings are like rough drafts” on the themes that Bishop would further explore in her poetry (30). The accuracy of this statement seems to me only better verified by the publication of *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box* (2006), in which everyday readers for the first time get a glimpse of Bishop’s work in progress. Most of the drafts and fragments included in this volume reveal a highly dynamic method of composition: the working-pieces are striated with interpolations and frequently organized in columns that visually reproduce the permeable interface between contrasting voices, intertwined thoughts and feelings, the word and the world. Given these insights into Bishop’s compositional method, it behooves us to consider further how the interface between the visual and verbal arts was a preoccupation for Bishop as she developed a rhetorical poetics. As I have shown in previous chapters, the development of a rhetorical poetics that aspires to serve ethical ends cannot be fully realized without a proper consideration of the rhetoric of ekphrasis. As the primary motivating canon (if you will) of inter-artistic experimentation in literature, and one that is by definition meta-referential and therefore critical in its function, ekphrasis plays a guiding role in determining what role art will play in the world.

At this point, the relevance of ekphrasis to Bishop’s poetic method is a contested question; however, this is largely due to a common misunderstanding of ekphrasis as a
mode of poetic invention, and of the critical way in which Bishop employs ekphrastic rhetoric. Recent criticism has turned away from the analytical category of ekphrasis in reading Bishop’s relationship to the visual arts. In this, readers are following Bishop’s own expressed dislike for poems derived from existing artworks, paintings specifically. According to Samuels, Bishop “considers [such imitation] to be an evasion or short cut of the real work of writing,” and finds it often results in poems that are allusive, hyper-cultural, and, in Bishop’s terms, “too ‘literary’” (16). This view, however, consigns ekphrasis to an overly narrow formalism—the lyrical set piece describing a work of art—I have tried to unsettle throughout this study and forecloses any meaningful synthesis the more expansive concept of ekphrasis as a rhetorical practice of reading could provide. A similar misstep characterizes Zachariah Pickard’s equivocations with the ekphrastic tradition. On the basis of its “modern sense” Pickard excludes ekphrasis from his study, despite its availability as a paradigm for understanding the rhetorical motivations of description. “However popular ekphrasis might be with her contemporaries,” he goes so far as to suggest on this premise, “it is the antithesis of Bishop’s own poetics of description” of “careful, disinterested scrutiny.” This view quickly loses purchase, however, when we turn our gaze to those poems that in citing this modern tradition seek to challenge it, those poems that use ekphrasis as a figural representation for the encounter between self and other, or those inter-artistic practices which employ ekphrasis as a theoretical figure for art’s exchange with itself and the world.

Despite these more recent objections, Bonnie Costello has clearly delineated Bishop’s entry into “a long tradition of ekphrastic verse which ascribes to the plastic and graphic media the virtues of permanence, presence, inexhaustible expressiveness, and
above all the ability to evoke a moment of life and movement within static forms” (Questions 215). As Costello explains in Questions of Mastery, Bishop’s engagement with this tradition is motivated by her interest in the “temporal status” of visual works of art, a position they share with poems and which grants them privileged access to the resources of memory (215). This is a crucial distinction because, by illustrating the historical contingency that both visual and verbal representations share, not only does it diminish the opposition of the spatio-visual and the temporo-verbal texts upon which the ekphrastic tradition is typically structured, but it brings into focus the critical quality of Bishop’s praxis, which seeks not aesthetic mastery but what Costello calls “a more limited concept of art’s commemorative function” (216). At length, Costello describes the special privilege accorded to this temporal status in Bishop’s poems on works of art, suggesting that it remains operative as a force for embracing the aesthetic potential of memory to represent multiple realities:

[Bishop’s] emphasis on the material origins and conditions of the work of art, as well as the historical contingency of artist and viewer, develops a drama within the beholding. Illusion persists, but, like memory, loosed from the myths of origin and transcendence into a fractured mirror-world time. The visual medium activates memory and, by compressing experience, releases it from linear confinement and necessity. It provides a meditative center into which the sense of time can enter and engage still forms without the bitterness of loss. Thus the transcendent unity of the visual space celebrated in the ekphrastic tradition often becomes in her beholding a “compression” of multiple realities. Bishop deidealizes without destroying the mimetic principle of art, disseminating the gaze into a plurality of glances, loosing pictorial from real space without an absolute gap. She converts the ekphrastic opposition between art’s eternity and experiential time into a more limited concept of art’s commemorative function. (Questions 215-16)

In other words, even as she emphasizes visual art’s capacity to endure, which is nevertheless not the eternal, aesthetic sublime precisely because it draws upon memory
and subsists in the historical moment, Bishop deidealizes and opens up to questioning the ontological grounds (i.e., “permanence, presence, inexhaustible expressiveness,” “origin,” “transcendence,” “linear confinement and necessity,” etc.) on which the visual arts have historically staked their claim to authority. What I fear critics like Samuels and Pickard risk by too hastily dismissing or reducing the concept of ekphrasis is overlooking precisely this intervention by Bishop in her cultural moment and the ethical preoccupations and political consequences of her use of the ekphrastic tradition.

Other recent readings have had more success further articulating Costello’s seminal argument and demonstrating the elements of ethical and political revisionism revealed by Bishop’s engagement with the ekphrastic tradition. Susan Rosenbaum has argued that we need not categorically separate Bishop’s descriptive poetics from the modern sense of ekphrasis, which is necessarily tied up in the institutional aesthetic norms created and sustained by a museum culture. In fact, she reads Bishop’s penchant for the “miniature,” girded by a representational method of “exaggerated attention to detail,” as simultaneously a recognition of “the conventional understanding of ekphrasis as a kind of copying or description, with clear ties to a feminine tradition of detail work,” as well as a subversive challenge to modern museum culture with its emphasis on “acquisitive perspective” and the structural (and cultural) hierarchies supporting this normative aesthetics (Rosenbaum 79-80). Therefore, although women artists have historically been constrained to employing these representational strategies, Bishop’s is as much a critically-minded election of a method that “results in an artful distortion of perspective that unsettles the institutionally-defined frames through which we understand and value art” (Rosenbaum 80). Bishop’s ekphrases not only thereby raise integral ethical
critiques against an institutional aesthetics that substantiates its conventional authority on
the idea of organic unity and the careful subjugation of description to argument, itemized
by Naomi Schor as the “subordinat[ion of] the periphery to the center, the accessory to
the principal, the foreground to the background” (qtd in Rosenbaum 80); they also give
voice to a political project by exposing the systematically privileged masculinist frames
that shape what we view as art and how we understand its functions.

Such politically motivated ekphrasis brings into focus neglected perspectives,
which in being alternately nominated as “feminine” and “primitive” are held in
oppositional proximity to Western aesthetic ideals while repeatedly excluded from
consideration on the grounds of threats of androgyny or miscegenation. This reading is
further confirmed by Joanne Feit Diehl, who recognizes in the trajectory of twentieth-
century female ekphrasis varied attempts “to throw off the paralysis that in part
undergirds the [deeply gendered] masculine version” of traditional ekphrasis.164 While
Diehl perhaps overstates her position when she surmises that the female tradition of
ekphrasis “acquires its own trajectory” primarily “[t]o the extent that the woman poet can
rid herself of the burden of speaking to or for the semiotic ‘other’” (53), her attention to
Bishop’s variable strategies of identification goes a long way toward showing how
speaking to or for the other, whether semiotic or cultural, can take forms beyond those
promoted by this heterosexual paradigm. In seeking to transgress these gendered
identifications, while concurrently privileging the basic encounter between self and other
that ekphrasis fosters, Bishop is able to reveal how paradigmatic heterosexual
identifications, if they are not opened up to interrogation by the critical reading, often
condone various forms of censure, constraint, and violent subordination of “others.”
Bishop’s use of ekphrasis strikes a delicate balance between the invention of a rhetorical mode for the purposes of satisfying ethical obligations toward others as one negotiates how to speak to and for them, and the employment of strategies and tropes that draw upon historically substantiated paragonal methods of ekphrastic practice, which nevertheless may be diverted to critical ends. I am supposing that as readers we feel simultaneously drawn to the promise and repelled by the threat of ekphrasis as a rhetorical strategy for articulating ethical encounters with others. To clarify, let me revisit the arguments advanced by Mitchell and Fry. Too few scholars have given sufficient heed to a consistent structural theme in W. J. T. Mitchell’s analyses of ekphrasis; namely, that our fascination with the problem of ekphrasis is organized around the operative fiction “that ekphrasis [the verbal representation of a visual representation] is impossible,” which is stoked by “familiar assumptions about the inherent, essential properties of the various [and incommensurable] media and their proper or appropriate modes of perception” (Mitchell 696). As Mitchell demonstrates at length in *Iconology* and reiterates in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” semiotics gives the lie to this fiction, since we know “that there is, semantically speaking, no difference between texts and images…there are [only] basic differences between the media at the level of signs, forms, materials of representation, and rules for combining them” (Mitchell 702). And yet, Mitchell insists that, because “the ekphrastic encounter is purely figurative,” poets and readers continue to use it to imaginatively transform the technical difficulties of semiotic otherness into a framework for overcoming metaphysical Otherness: “[A] network of associations [ ] seem to gather, like iron filings on a magnet, around the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome” (699). As
we have seen, ekphrastic practice most often attempts to overcome Otherness through either a hopeful merging with and subsumption of the other, or a fearful rejection of it. This ambivalence, Mitchell insists, turns first of all upon the enabling and disabling fiction of “indifference,” which contrary to appearances presupposes the ontological impossibility of overcoming difference and, therefore, provides the motivation for a rhetorical solution. Although from an objective standpoint ekphrastic indifference makes little sense, from a subjective one it begins to explain how ekphrasis serves as a rhetorical mode for handling fundamental ethico-political concerns:

Perhaps the key, then, to our ambivalence about ekphrasis is simply that it transfers into the realm of literary art sublimated versions of our ambivalence about social others. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with the Other. Ekphrastic indifference maintains itself in the face of disquieting signs that ekphrasis may be far from trivial and that, if it is only a sham or illusion, it is one which, like ideology itself, must be worked through. This “working through” of ekphrastic ambivalence is, I want to suggest, one of the principal themes of ekphrastic poetry, one of the things it does with the problems staged for it by the theoretical and metaphysical assumptions about media, the senses, and representation that make up ekphrastic hope, fear, and indifference.

(Mitchell 702-03)

The “working through” of difference that ekphrastic “indifference” presupposes, the paragonal turn that motivates the rhetorical dis-location/-location of the ontological category of the self and the figural movement toward the other, may end up registering on the level of the political as a similar movement from indifference to non-indifference toward the concerns for social others. This is what I will attempt to show in my reading of Bishop’s poetry.

That so many readers are tempted to argue that Bishop’s poetry actually turns away from or rejects ekphrasis can, I think, be further clarified and corrected by considering Paul H. Fry’s recent emendation of his argument in A Defense of Poetry. In
that work, Fry argued that poetry, in its broadest sense, is characterized by a desire for “ostension,” or the temporary release from the need to signify, and taking delight in the indifference of ontic being. In ekphrastic poems in particular, he discerns the prevalence of this theme, because they “see painting highlighting the moment of insignificance in phenomenal perception” and, consequently, envy its supposed freedom from signification. In “The Lamplit Answer?: Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s Antiekphrases,” Fry returns to this topic to give particular attention to the question of women’s ekphrases. In initially raising this question in the earlier work, Fry had argued that women writing ekphrastic poetry often “recoil from in-difference [displayed by painting] on behalf of some form of sympathy with otherness” (Lamplit 55). In the latter work, he continues the argument by suggesting that, in general, “[t]he desire that paintings awaken is a desire for the absence of desire, for an escape from the turmoil of desire’s rationalizations—which is to say, of signification. For women writing ekphrastic poetry, however, as I said unguardedly in 1995 yet still believe, what is more often aroused is a desire for what is seen to be absent from the “ostensive” moment in painting” (Lamplit 57). What is most compelling in this essay, however, is not the discovery of any gendered theory of ekphrasis so much as the counterthesis that a poet’s work (and here he looks solely at works by Schnackenberg) can “show[ ] that ekphrasis may be so disappointed by what it sees, or fails to see, that it takes an iconoclastic turn” (56). Although his title suggests something other or opposed to ekphrasis, in his discussion of Schnackenberg’s work Fry actually describes how ekphrasis can be “displace[d]...away from itself in a surprising number of directions”: it might not describe a painting, but “accompan[y]” or “supplement” it; describe what is absent from the painting; turn to meta-description;
“represent language as an image or natural sign”; imagine how others see an artwork; conflate a single work with many others or an entire genre; or even “insist[...on the impenetrability, the inaccessible otherness, of images” (62, 65, 66). This limited, but suggestive, compendium of rhetorical standpoints has much less to do with a turn away from or “farewell” to ekphrasis, as Fry contends, than with thinking through the rhetorical possibilities occasioned by the encounter with otherness central to ekphrasis. Taken in aggregate, these techniques appear less extrinsic to the tradition of ekphrasis than indicative of the forms of expositional estrangement employed by any number of critically-minded twentieth-century practitioners of ekphrasis, especially those preoccupied with ethical concerns.168

Taking Mitchell’s and Fry’s ideas together, I propose the following model for understanding Bishop’s critical engagement with the ekphrastic tradition, a model that reads two critical movements apprehended in two distinct, but co-implicated registers. On the one hand, as a technique, ekphrasis begins in the recognition of the nondifference of significant media but ends in the assumption of incommensurable difference. As Mitchell reminds us, on the level of semiotics, verbal and visual signs share a fundamental similitude. Although each signifies differently and employs a distinct grammar, which determines its methods of construction and combination, they both nonetheless signify and employ grammar; words and images both form “texts” which are “read.” The nondifference of signs, the essential similarity between the signifying potential of media, therefore, ensures the possibility of ekphrasis and success becomes merely a matter of technical facility in the manipulation of signs. But through this reductive focus on the merely technical, ekphrasis enacts an inversion of priorities: the essential and meaningful
are subsumed to the nonessential and the trivial. The poet practicing ekphrasis becomes preoccupied with peripheral details and matters of selection, angles of perspective, and modal and tonal inflection take precedence. In other words, signifying differences proliferate to the point where success becomes improbable or, finally, impossible. Inessential differences, which nonetheless make up the basic, particular materials of ekphrasis, encroach upon the composition to such an extent that they appear as if insurmountable. This is the fiction of “indifference” Mitchell delineates and it projects ekphrasis into the realm of indeterminacy. We might say that, on this technical level, ekphrasis experiences a shift from grammatical actuality to problematic contingency; at any rate, the question of the rhetorical is here breached.

On the other hand, rhetorically, ekphrasis reveals a shift from indifference to non-indifference toward the other, which implicates the breach of the ethical and political. At the very moment when ekphrasis is figured as impossible, the rhetorical takes on an enhanced performativity. The impossible approaches as a threat and to counter it the poet must erect imaginative defenses in order to resolve or dispel that threat. Whereas ekphrasis ideally seeks the transparency of being freely, or full access to the visual text and its realities such that it no longer functions as an intermedial frame structuring poetic vision—which may be yet another way of stating Fry’s ontic thesis—on the level of technique it is affronted by unanticipated differences which appear increasingly bound up with its own fate. The poet, therefore, draws upon the imaginative powers of rhetoric and turns to metaphor, image, and identification in order, in the case of a hopeful resolution, “to make us see,” as Mitchell states (696), or turns to resistance, evasion, and speaking otherwise in order, in case of a fearful expulsion, to preserve the threatened boundaries
between same and other. Arguably, every ekphrasis manifests both of these rhetorical motives. As poems they do not achieve the indexical, the quality of merely pointing to an image or painting, and even if they do at times aspire to and achieve to varying degrees the “emblematic” status discussed by Murray Krieger, ekphrases do not thereby replace their subjects. Each ekphrasis represents the desires and counterdesires of hope and fear and depicts the incessant negotiations between sameness and alterity. Seeking free, indifferent being, ekphrasis finally comes to its unquiet “rest” in the knots and occlusions of difference, wherein it sees its own fate inextricably bound up with that of its other. That this is fundamentally the realization of non-indifference, and thus the opening for the expression of ethical and political motivations, is what I would suggest must be explored in further studies of ekphrasis. Mitchell perceives the opening for the ethical, in particular, in his analysis of ekphrastic fear: “It is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the ‘indifferent’ phase of ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on” (697-98). I would argue, however, that moral imperatives are not exclusive to ekphrastic fear; they can also be expressed in ekphrastic hope as it reckons with difference. That Mitchell privileges the moment of fear with a particular ethical gravity may better be interpreted through thinking the “iconoclasm” Fry draws to our attention. If we conceive the moments of ekphrastic hope and fear as simultaneously operative in the encounter between same and other, then we are compelled to take notice of a resistant iconoclasm that intones an ethical command not to subsume the other to a totalized thematic even as it receives our acknowledgement and concern. Such structural inconclusiveness functions as a kind of ethical insurance against foreclosure on the ideological motivations which
enter into and enhance the rhetorical space of ekphrasis, staking a guarantee that the political remain non-indifferent, open to critique, and oriented by the encounter which, as the provenance of ekphrasis, must not be effaced.

2.

Before I elaborate on this model to explain how the critical employment of ekphrasis affords us a poetic analogue to the theorization of the ethical and political in the poststructuralist philosophies of Levinas and Derrida, I will first consider two of Bishop’s quintessential ekphrastic poems with the intention of drawing forth some of their political implications. From the lessons derived therein, I will then discuss how these implications display fundamental connections to the work of Levinas and Derrida. Afterwards, following the course laid out by my earlier chapters, I will demonstrate how Bishop’s rhetorical strategies continue to bear out the ethico-political motivations of ekphrasis, even in poems that are to all appearances only tenuously related to the ekphrastic tradition. Again, my intentions are to show the centrality of this critical rhetorical mode for Bishop’s poetics, especially as through its diffusive operation it helps us to identify and delineate her imaginative ethics.

No analysis of Bishop’s engagement with the ekphrastic tradition can fail to account for the humbly named “Poem” (1972), from the poet’s last completed collection Geography III (1976), and by extension its prequel, “Large Bad Picture” (1946), which first appeared in North & South. The quiet insistence of the former’s title would seem to justify the amount of attention this particular poem has received in Bishop scholarship and the prevalent inclination to view it as her “unofficial ars poetica” (Rosenbaum 73).
Together these poems reveal the continuity as well as the peculiar character of Bishop’s critical employment of ekphrasis. Despite the fact that roughly thirty years separates the composition of these poems, there are a number of striking similarities between them. Both poems take as their impetus paintings executed by a great-uncle (presumably the same artist, “Uncle George,” executes each work), the humility of which clearly distinguishes her from many of her contemporaries. Unlike Auden, Williams, or even Jarrell, for example, Bishop chooses not to begin from a meditation on the works of “masters,” but takes inspiration from the familiar and the flawed. That she chooses artworks which are clearly extraneous to broader cultural economies of aesthetic value and confined to familial exchange, coupled with the fact that her readers have no way of verifying either the genuineness of these particular works or the accuracy of her descriptions of them, suggests that Bishop also wants to emphasize the contingency of their worth and the inherent risk of their imaginative qualities. As John Hollander might say, these poems blur the boundaries between actual and notional ekphrasis, further underscoring the fictional quality of all ekphrastic endeavors.\(^{170}\) This is not a grand tradition to which Bishop is now heir, but a troubled and discontinuous family genealogy through which “a minor family relic [is] / handed along collateral to owners / who looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to” (\textit{CP}, “Poem” 176). For readers, this legacy remains irksomely occluded; we must take the histories proffered to us within the poems as the sole collateral of these works’ authenticity. In the earlier poem, the history is brief but uncertain and comes to us from afar:

\begin{verbatim}
Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture. (\textit{CP}, “Large” 11)
\end{verbatim}
In the later poem, the history is even more opaque, interceded by ambiguous relations, and comes to us across not only a geographical expanse, but an expanse of memory:

Would you like this? I’ll probably never have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George, he’d be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....

(CP, “Poem” 177, emphasis and ellipses in original)

This incomplete snippet of conversation, asserting itself from the recesses of family memory, intrudes upon the poem to offer a fleeting glimpse of the artist and the painting’s provenance, but Bishop somewhat ruthlessly cuts it off. After a paragraph break, she states simply, “I never knew him” (177), in effect emphasizing the unfinished quality of this history and circumventing any attempt to attribute great or masterful quality to the artist and his creation.

Additionally, Costello has noted some key differences in Bishop’s ekphrases, which are clearly manifest in these two poems. Traditionally conceived, the ekphrastic poem usually insists upon a hierarchical relationship. Often the poetic speaker adopts a devotional attitude toward the visual artwork’s stillness, relegating his own work to secondary status as a retelling of the more perfect object (Questions 224). This may vary, however, in that it is not always visual art that is privileged. At times, the verbal art trumps the visual, a conclusion which Lessing tentatively came to in his Laocoön and which has been implicitly upheld by the privilege accorded to language as the demonstrative model of signification in discussions of semiotics and representation. While Bishop’s ekphrases are not without their allotment of awe, they usually defy hierarchization and “explore the reciprocity between verbal and visual representation”
(Questions 224). This is at least circuitously acknowledged in the closing lines of “Large Bad Picture,” where the speaker wonders about the inspiration for the painting—
“commerce or contemplation” (CP 12)—as well as in the opening lines of “Poem,” in which the painting described is measured by a problematic standard:

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,  
American or Canadian,  
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays  
—this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)  
has never earned any money in its life. (CP 176)

Although the very next line evokes qualities we more readily associate with Romantic and high modernist aesthetics, these same qualities are here declined through a metaphoric transfer of the work of art from its aesthetic self-subsistence to the unpredictable world of exchange: “Useless and free, it has spent seventy years / as a minor family relic” (176, my emphasis). It is difficult to imagine many earlier instances of ekphrasis making such short work of aesthetic privilege by so informally submitting the work of art to judgment based on its potential for monetary value. Ultimately, however, the implication here is that this work of art, which in its aesthetic “freedom” only garners mere “looks” or even the absence of “bother,” will have to be submitted to a different form of judgment, one that is premised not on its ability to “earn” and “spend” but on its potential for significant “collateral” exchange with others, here figured not only as the poem but ultimately as “life itself” (CP 177).172

Furthermore, as Costello remarks, Bishop’s ekphrases are unusual because of their proclivity for the subject of landscapes, which “traditionally represented duration in nature rather than the ‘still moment.’ Even Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts,’ which includes a great deal of landscape description, centers around a moment of human action”
This is a crucial point, not only because it gives us clear insight into why Bishop’s ekphrastic practices productively reflect the techniques and preoccupations of her non-ekphrastic works, many major ones of which come to mind as centrally figuring a landscape described in painterly detail (a partial list would include “Quai d’Orléans,” “The Bight,” “At the Fishhouses,” “Cape Breton,” “The Moose,” and “Santarém”); but it also displays the tenuous position Bishop takes vis-à-vis the ekphrastic tradition and its modernist appropriations. In Laocoön, we recall, Lessing prescribed that the subject matter the visual and verbal arts take should be based in their medial constraints: sculpture and painting, being spatial representations, produce their greatest effects when they strategically select scenes that, in being presented in medias res, spatially represent the central agon in a moment out of time (e.g., Laocoön in thrall to the serpents that will seal his fate in the famed sculpture attributed to Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus); poetry, being a temporal representation, excels to the extent that it depicts actions which unfold in time (e.g., the narration of Laocoön’s demise in the works of Homer, Quintus, Virgil, and Dryden). Although Lessing finally gives poetry the superior edge, because of the freedom of its more ephemeral medium—being both spoken and written, its significance is understood both in time and in unified moments of apprehension—modernist aesthetics, as Joseph Frank demonstrated in “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” tended to reject Lessing’s division of the arts and defined aesthetic success by the extent to which literature could approximate the effects of its other and realize the still moment, as in Eliot’s “still point of the turning world,” in which the poet plays on the ambiguous senses of still, suggesting both stasis and duration. Bishop’s ekphrastic practice is seen to waver uncertainly between these two
alternatives. Her consistent turn to landscape in some sense functions as a reappropriation of a temporal genre, which itself sits uncomfortably in the visual tradition, and as a revival of the iconoclastic spirit of Lessing. Both “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem” are couched in the temporal act of remembering—the former begins with this very word, while the latter, at its heart, gestures “I can almost remember” (CP 176)—and her method of reading the paintings/landscapes insists on the (dis)continuities of temporal perception. At the same time, however, Bishop also willfully exploits the “stillness” of these depicted scenes for her own purposes. She makes much of the unnatural stillness of the scene presented in “Large Bad Painting,” as we shall see further on, and in “Poem” the durative quality of remembrance is often brought face to face with its foil in the instantaneity of knowledge: “Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!...There it is” (CP 176).

Those, it would seem, are the essential characteristics of Bishop’s ekphrases, but now let us turn to a consideration of the pertinent nonessential, trivial aspects of Bishop’s ekphrastic techniques. In each of these poems, Bishop emphasizes both the limited abilities of the artist and the earnestness with which the paintings were composed. One is decidedly “big” (CP, “Large” 11) and flirts with grandiose notions of the sublime, while the other, “[a] sketch done in an hour, ‘in one breath’,…Not much. / About the size of our abidance” (CP, “Poem” 177). If Bishop prefers the latter and its unassuming qualities, she still finds reasons to appreciate both, despite their faults. “Large Bad Picture,” beyond just its title, is freighted with censorious descriptors which emphasize the depth of the painting’s failure. Its attempts at awesome effects on the viewer enter, in Bishop’s language, the realm of hyperbole and affectation:

Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high… (CP 11)

The first two lines display the extent to which the speaker is willing to suspend her
disbelief as she attempts to reconcile her sight to the required view, “receding for miles;”
however, the awkward execution of this wide perspective is here duplicated by the
suspension of the grammatical subject (“overhanging pale blue cliffs”) until the third line
of the stanza, a lack of skill only exacerbated by the speaker’s overeager ejaculation in
the last line, “hundreds of feet high!” Furthermore, the artist’s attempts at exactitude
result in an obviously non-mimetic uniformity, which the speaker treats with lighter irony
in the next stanza:

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves. (CP 11, my emphasis)

Bishop’s description of the painting also singles out specific instances where the artist’s
applications of particularly methodical technical innovations further dispel the illusion.
As Costello notes, the painting “is a crude imitation of nineteenth-century landscape
conventions, its aim at transparency everywhere interrupted by conspicuous schemata”
(Questions 216). Two of these occur in the next two stanzas. “On” that bay of “perfect
waves,” the speaker lovingly jeers, “sits a fleet of small black ships, / square-rigged, sails
furled, motionless, / their spars like burnt match sticks” (11). Though the imitation may
be crude as a result of these ships’ rigid suspension above the waves, which belies any
buoyant affect, one acknowledges nonetheless that the speaker derives great pleasure
from rehearsing these ships’ ploddingly uniform details and in rendering conspicuous by
a deft simile not only that the ships’ masts resemble, but that they were more likely than not impressed upon the canvas by, “burnt match-sticks.”

Equally, one senses the relish with which Bishop describes the child-appropriate resolution her great-uncle seizes to redress the glaring emptiness of “a flushed, still sky”:

And high above them, over the tall cliffs’ semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds hanging in n’s in banks. (CP 11)

Bishop concludes the poem with a summative tone, returning to those beloved ships and speculating on the painting’s lasting significance: “Apparently they have reached their destination. / It would be hard to say what brought them there, / commerce or contemplation” (CP 12). The antecedent for “they” is clearly “the ships” in the preceding line; however, the pronoun gathers about it some degree of ambiguity due to the slight shift in vantage point achieved in these final lines. The speaker has made a subtle leap from description to interpretation and raises an implicit question: was it for commerce or contemplation that these ships came to this quiet bay? Furthermore, as the signs bearing the most conspicuous imprimatur of their creator, the ships stand in metonymically for the artist, of whom Bishop may rightly ask, was your painting created for commerce or contemplation? Perhaps the joke of the poem is that neither is the likely alternative. The painting is too commonplace and derivative to realize much exchange value. Nor does its spotty execution suggest the likelihood that the artist experienced a cathartic renewal of his passion for nature or society. Perhaps the question itself is too imposing. Bishop seems to have refrained from posing it in order to keep final questions from being asked.

These final lines also display a displaced ekphrastic allusion. Breughel’s “expensive delicate ship,” as Auden described it in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “sailed
calmly on,” fleeing the scene of the tragedy. George’s ships sit awaiting their “something amazing.” Although Bishop only hesitantly invokes the prized stillness of the visual arts, here she seems to hold out stillness as a reinvigorating supplement to the stillness of her great-uncle’s painting. The painting’s stillness is deadening, a technical failure which threatens to jettison the work into oblivion, an abandoned work on the memory of a particular person never to be revived, a *nature morte*. Bishop’s stillness, on the other hand, is a readerly repetition of the work that keeps the affective potential of the painting alive. Not only does Bishop repeat the composition of the painting through her carefully critical description of its perspective, background, and foreground, but she also carefully augments the painting’s qualities and the painter’s intentions by inscribing their affective qualities through language, primarily through strategies of repetition. For example, in describing the beloved ships, Bishop rhythmically strings together a pattern of sibilants, thereby restoring to them the swaying and susurrant qualities the painter lacked the abilities to supply: “*a fleet of small black ships, / square-rigged, sails furled, motionless, / their spars like burnt match-sticks.*” She also turns to interlocution, supplying what both painting and poem alone are fundamentally deficient in realizing without the aid of the other in the ekphrastic moment: voice and vocalist. “One can hear their crying, crying,” Bishop ventures to say of the “fine black birds,” “The only sound there is / except for occasional sighing / as a large aquatic animal breathes” (11). Lastly, directly prior to the very last lines we’ve already considered, Bishop uses her language to enact a loving caress, which hovers above the limit between care and intrusion:

> In the pink light
> the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
> round and round and round at the same height
> in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,
while the ships consider it. (CP 11-12)

The erotic tone at this moment, to the extent that it entices our vision away from the painting, borders on the rapacious. The speaker’s impetuosity in figuring touching also transgresses the shroud of austerity behind which the work of art is generally withheld to preserve its aura. But if the figurative caress does transgress, it is a transgression which constitutes the possibility of love by opening the work of art up to being touched by difference and revealing its being without the threat of erasure. In Bishop’s repetitions “rolling, rolling, / round and round and round,” one can sense her reenactment of the composition itself, retouching the painting’s light source with a different patina, perhaps, but one that only allows it to shine all the more. We might, then, further expand that final “they” to include not only mercantilists and monastics, George, and painters of nineteenth-century landscapes, but also Auden, Williams, Jarrell, and the old masters who no longer need submit to a limiting question or its final answers.

The much later “Poem” also relies on the repetitious rehearsal of its painting’s technical merits and demerits, though with a considerably more understated refinement. Whereas “Large Bad Picture” had for the most part surrendered its attention to the depicted landscape alone (the real subject and artist are only explicitly considered in the opening and closing stanzas), this later poem invites recurrent interruption, more thoroughly surrendering the sovereign appeal of both painting and poem. Here Bishop prefaces her description of the painting with extrinsic aspects that could only be derived from her experiences, not the viewing of the work itself:

> It must be Nova Scotia; only there does one see gabled wooden houses painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white. (*CP* 176, emphasis added)

These qualifications have a double-edged effect. As in the previous poem, they offer supplementation for the missing qualities of the painting, when in particular details are withheld or incapable of being executed through the artist’s technical abilities. At the same time, they impinge on the painting’s self-containment by seeking to add information that is nonessential to the painter’s intentional field of vision. This play is further compounded by Bishop’s disingenuous handling of the artwork as alternately a completed “painting ([and/or] a sketch for a larger one?)” (176). Again, we find both the subtle questioning and the exaltation of the work expressed through the lens of its technical accomplishment. “Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple / —that gray-blue wisp—or is it?” the speaker asks. Has the artist successfully depicted these elements of the landscape, such that the speaker can confidently list them off? Or is the poet merely populating the scene with her own expectations, with what her nostalgic memories tell her belongs in Nova Scotia? Shifting her perspective from the background forward, she happily notes her easy recognition of the artist’s intention: “In the foreground / a water meadow with some tiny cows, / two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows” (176).

Likewise, in a gesture that reiterates her caress of the sun in “Large Bad Picture,” she discovers the most precise minutiae in her great-uncle’s hasty daubs: “Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow, / fresh-squiggled from the tube” (176). All of these instances of supplementation continue to build up an interpretation that this merely suggestive sketch can barely support; however, for Bishop this only enhances the diminutive painting’s humane aesthetic potential of “commemoration,” which she had only begun to gesture at in “The Monument.”
The remainder of the second verse paragraph then carefully orchestrates these supplemented details into a *tour de force* pattern of tightly controlled and palliated repetitions:

> The air is fresh and *cold; cold* early spring clear as *gray* glass; a half inch of blue sky below the steel-*gray* storm clouds.  
> (They were the artist’s specialty.)  
> A *specklike bird* is flying to the left.  
> Or is it a *flyspeck* looking like a *bird*. (CP 176, emphasis added)

Whereas in the earlier example Bishop employs repetition to emphasize the affective appeal of the painting, here the repetitions are incrementally dynamic, playing boldly within a dialectic of sameness and alterity. We are asked to imagine “air [that] is fresh and…clear as gray glass” and a sky that is both transparently “blue” and opaque with “steel-gray storm clouds.” At this point, too, the sanctity of the painting is all but destroyed as the boundaries between representation and experience are unceremoniously razed. In an aside, Bishop intimates that the clouds encroach upon the early spring landscape not in deference to the rules of verisimilitude in painting, but because they are what the artist knows how to paint. And in the last two lines, she puns in order to underscore the deterioration the painting has suffered at the hands of ill-use and neglect over the years, as well as the paradoxical truth that being at the mercy of rough exchange has only served to augment the painting’s significant potential.

It is at this point that “Poem” gives over to an extended meditation on art’s ability to bring us face to face with otherness, thus realizing what “Large Bad Picture” had only hinted at. Here visual representation is called forth to encounter its immediate semiotic Other, verbal temporality, which Bishop memorably described in “At the Fishhouses” as being
like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (CP 66)

Yet, this visual representation is also called upon in “Poem” to justify our encounters with all others, figured in “Poem” as “life and the memory of it.” “We both knew this place,” Bishop surmises of this artist and herself:

How strange. And it’s still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided—“visions” is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art “copying from life” and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which? (CP 177)

The demotion from “visions” to “looks” is central to this encounter and illuminates its ethical character. “Vision” is too sacrosanct, Bishop implores, because it annihilates any chance of recognizing others. Visions are fundamentally apart, perspectives that decompose inward in their own self-regard.

But “looks” suppose relation: they are gazes that may be directed toward each other or may “coincide,” may venture forth side-by-side, distinct though equally cognizant of the many others that their own exchange of looks presupposes. Though Bishop cries “I know it!” or as Jarrell attributes to her, “I have seen it” (PA 235), this is knowledge that is submitted to the contingencies of time and place (our histories), to the rehearsals and improvisations of memory, which call us beyond our self-enclosure from afar: “I never knew him” (CP 177). Bishop acknowledges the limits of her knowledge after all:

Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time[...]
the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese. (CP 117)

Though in accepting these limits she sacrifices certainty, she also recoups an inward
“abidance,” a readiness that is, if not infallible or abundant, prophetic in its orientation to
the future and alterity. Through the exchange of “looks,” Bishop is able to seize upon
“the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust” (117), an actualization akin
to what Harold Schweizer has called seeing with “sabbath eyes.” As he writes, “Bishop’s
historical understanding requires a prior ethical obligation to the particular, accomplished
in the lingering aesthetic gaze” (Schweizer 55). Or, as C.K. Doreski has noted,
Bishop’s poetry from Geography III is able to realize “a socially rather than egoistically based
phenomenology.” Bishop’s willingness to sacrifice “romantic assumption[s] of
authorial presence” in favor of an openness to other perspectives allows her to “socialize
[her] poem[s]…in the absence of conventional authorial sanction” (Doreski 421).

3.

Now I would like to step back from the poems for a moment to reflect on some of
the implications Bishop’s ekphrastic aesthetics have for understanding poetry in light of
some of the key ethical concepts of poststructuralist philosophy. In particular, I would
like to view Bishop’s poetry under the influence of the movement from the ethical to the
political made in the penultimate chapter of Emmanuel Levinas’s Otherwise than Being,
and then I will consider some practical applications of Levinas’s rethinking of the
political as expressed by the later works of Jacques Derrida and Simon Critchley. In this
chapter, “Subjectivity and Infinity,” Levinas stresses two important concepts, which he has significantly revised in accordance with the ethical event he calls “substitution” or “the-one-for-the-other,” that are relevant to our understanding of Bishop’s poetic motivations: “subjectivity” and “non-indifference.” Objectivity, for Levinas, is circumspect; it only has concern for “being’s essence revealed in truth,” and is therefore incapable of expressing concern for others: “Objectivity concerns the being of entities that bears it; it signifies the indifference of what appears to its own appearing” (OB 131). But to this Levinas does not merely oppose an equally suspect, and privileged notion of “subjective lived experience.” Instead, he wishes to think subjectivity as expressed through the “subject in signification,” that is, in the experience of the subject in the relation of the-one-for-the-other (131). The subject is necessarily absorbed by being and the movement of objective intelligibility, Levinas submits, but it nevertheless retains there the sign of a disruptive, ethical potential to resist the orders of rationality: “We can distinguish in the movement from one to the other a hesitation, a time, the need for an effort, for good or bad luck, for the structures [of being and objectivity] to be packed in. It is through this event, this becoming open, in the intelligible itself that we can understand the subjectivity that would here still be wholly conceived out of the intelligibility of being” (133). Resistant, yes, but not wholly responsible, because it succumbs to a false temporal freedom which can then be drawn into the service of objectivity through the present, “the privileged time of truth and being”—the subject that is caught up in the present would be compelled into the service of objectivity as “a power for re-presentation in the quasi-active sense of the word: it would draw up the temporal disparity into a present, into a simultaneousness” (133). This subject “acts like a subject
endowed with memory and as a historian, author of books in which the lost elements of the past or the elements still hoped for and feared receive simultaneity in a volume” (133, my emphasis).

Levinas’s notion of the truth inscribed through representation sounds quite like the traditional ekphrasis that does not, on the level of rhetoric, move beyond prescribed moral imperatives to face the other and rests confident in the fiction of its mastery. But for Levinas, the responsible subject “is structured as the-one-for-the-other” (135). It displays itself, in a manner that cannot be subsumed to any system, through its substitutability, which is such that the other could never be substituted for me: “In responsibility the same, the ego, is me, summoned, provoked, as irreplaceable, and thus accused as unique in the supreme passivity of one that cannot slip away without fault” (135). The idea that responsibility is possible only on the condition of being irreplaceable is corroborated by Derrida in his reading of the paradox of sacrifice in The Gift of Death (1993).176 In this work, he reevaluates the experience of sacrifice as described in the Akedah in chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis, and the solicitation of its themes performed by Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling. Derrida explains that sacrifice supposes the putting to death of the unique in terms of its being unique, irreplaceable, and most precious. It also therefore refers to the impossibility of substitution, the unsubstitutable; and then also to the substitution of an animal for man; and finally, especially this, by means of this impossible substitution itself, it refers to what links the sacred to sacrifice and sacrifice to secrecy. (GD 58)

The fundamental paradox Derrida perceives in sacrifice is retained in Levinas’s concept of substitution, in which the guilt of passivity always obligates the one to substitute herself for the other, and not that the other be asked to stand in her unique place as “a hostage…without transforming responsibility into a theatrical role” (OB 136). Crucially,
however, the resolution of this paradox, if in understanding that this paradox always remains significant we can express it as such, lies in the passage to the political. “By the implication of the one in the-one-for-the-other, by the substitution of the one for the other,” Levinas suggests, “the foundations of being are shaken or ensured” (OB 136, final emphasis mine). On that or, Levinas advances the thesis that the ethical relation, which always imposes itself on the hither side of being and “signifies prior to any world” (OB 137), can nevertheless be directed to political ends. This essentially approximates the model I have proposed for ekphrasis which, in ensuring the encounter with the other such that the artwork (qua poem) cannot imagine itself apart from a concern for the other (qua painting), can then turn this fundamental ethical realization to a concern for the world. Politically, this signifies as the passage to non-indifference.

Upending the traditional understanding of political commitment, Levinas defines non-indifference toward the other as “something beyond any commitment in the voluntary sense of the term, for it extends into my very bearing as an entity, to the point of substitution” (OB 138). As he further explains, commitments do not precede the subject but are only justified in the “disengaging of the unique one responsible,” who experiences this non-indifference toward others as an involuntary concern (OB 139). The unidirectional signification of responsibility toward the other which structures the encounter between the one and the other is inflected, however, by the introduction of another, or “the third party.” As Levinas writes later in the chapter, “The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party,” which is to say that the one has reached its limits of responsibility and must confront “the question” of the political (OB 157). But before one
may be tempted again to dismiss the ethical as derivative, based on this limitation, one should heed Simon Critchley’s astute reading in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*: “The return from the Saying to the Said in [“Subjectivity and Infinity”] is an attempt to thematize a justified Said, or a Said that is informed and interrupted by the trace of the Saying” (229). That is to say, the distancing that occurs in the proximity of all the others does not amount to the complete effacement of the ethical relation; rather, the obligation returns in the face of all the others each to each, restoring a justified egalitarianism, such that the possibility of ethics is dispersed multiply in the question of politics, which for Levinas foretells justice. The basic operation of the ethical face to face, if it is increasingly mobile and subject to complication, is yet maintained in the ideal of justice as Levinas imagines it: “justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest” (*OB* 159).

According to Critchley, Levinas’s ethico-politics of justice, therefore, promises “a new conception of the organization of political space” (*ED* 223). Fundamentally, he argues, Levinas’s politics of ethical difference conform to what Derrida has called “democracy to come,” which is not to be confused with the current liberal state or “liberal democracy” as it is conceived today (*ED* 211-12). For Critchley, this kind of democracy is instead “a permanent risk” and “an infinite task,” which seeks to reconfigure “[t]he space of the *polis* [as] not an enclosed or immanent structure, but rather a multiplication of spaces, a structure of repeated interruptions, in which the social totality is breached by the force of ethical transcendence” (*ED* 238). True democracy to come, therefore, stands in opposition to the idea of “the retreat of the political,” and is dependent on our ability to
navigate these multiple spaces and ensure the realization of the many political
osti where they foster. I propose that the “coincidence of looks” that we have seen
structure Bishop’s “Poem” is essentially aimed at the same political outcome: a
community that is open to question and difference or, in Critchley’s dialectical
expression “community [as] the coincidence of coincidence and non-coincidence” (ED
227).

It is important to acknowledge also how the thinking of Derrida illuminates
Bishop’s poetics. Critchley has gone to great lengths to underscore Derridean
deconstruction’s fundamentally ethical position, even if he finds (or found in 1992) its
thinking on the political, particularly on the taking of political decisions, in need of
supplementation. He expressly favors its function as a set of reading strategies with the
aims toward praxis and pedagogy. According to Critchley’s recent appraisal of the
philosopher, “Derrida cultivated what I would call a habitus or a praxis of
uncompromising philosophical vigilance, a vigilance at war with the governing
intellectual common sense and against what he liked to call—in a Socratic spirit, I
think—the doxa or narcissistic self-image of the age,” and this vigilance was motivated
by “an ethical demand” for justice, which “is undeconstructable” (6, 8-9). Not only
does Critchley find Derrida to be attuned to the infinite task of ethics, but he also finds
him eminently ethical in his treatment of “the singularity of the literary event”: “The
name ‘literature’ [in the works of Derrida] becomes the placeholder for the experience of
a singularity that cannot be assimilated into any overarching explanatory conceptual
schemata, but which permanently disrupts the possible unity of such a schema” (2).
Derek Attridge concurs that Derrida has continuously demonstrated through his works
how attentiveness to singularity, which is first an ethical motivation, can and should be
learned through reading literature.\textsuperscript{180}

To my knowledge, Derrida is rarely invoked in both Bishop scholarship and the
study of ekphrasis. If I have not heretofore made explicit reference to Derrida’s infamous
concept of \textit{differance}, which is both a \textit{differing} (or non-coincidence of signifier and
signified) and a \textit{deferring} (or temporal suspension of the signification such that the
signifier never comes to rest in a signified), I would like to here remark on how Derrida,
sharing much of Levinas’s ethical sensibility, employs a number of reading strategies and
terms which approximate those I have derived through Levinas. (“Sacrifice,” for
example, operates within a similarly doubled and “impossible” economy, as we have
earlier seen.)\textsuperscript{181} In a significant way, I am following more closely in Derrida’s footsteps
than in Levinas’s when I tend to discuss ethics in an \textit{active} aesthetic sense rather than as a
“passivity beyond passivity”: \textit{“differance in its active movement—what is comprehended
in the concept of differance without exhausting it—is what not only precedes
metaphysics but also extends beyond the thought of being”} (\textit{Gr} 143). I have also
explicitly drawn on some of his other concepts. Notably, in my above readings of Bishop,
I discuss the \textit{supplement}, which as I have already paraphrased expresses the two
significations of surfeit and deficit (see \textit{Gr} 144-45). And as Derrida insists, two rules
govern the logic of the supplement, especially as it applies to ekphrastic rhetoric: that
“the supplement is \textit{exterior}, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to
that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it;” and, “The supplement
will always be the moving of the tongue or acting through the hands of others” (\textit{Gr} 145,
147). Whereas lyric speakers may often use language offensively to vie for dominance
over others within the field of the poem, the performative quality of their rhetoric is only enhanced inasmuch as their language is critically evaluated for the degree to which it attempts to derive power from exterior supplementation, as well as for the degree to which it opens itself up to invasion, appropriation, seduction, or indulgence by the other.

The Derridean philosophical project, most familiar to us through the influence of *Of Grammatology* and its radicalization of linguistic signification, bears heavily on cultural as well as aesthetic studies. Mitchell makes the perceptive point in *Picture Theory* that the theorization of differance and archi-writing in that work has potentially as much to say about visual culture as it does about language discourses (95, 106). In fact, Derrida periodically reminds his readers that “deconstruction interferes with solid structures, ‘material’ institutions, and not only with discourses or signifying representations,” which renders it “distinct from a[] [simple] analysis or a ‘critique.’”

Another concept that I have attempted to fold into the logic of differance and supplementarity, and which I will cite more explicitly from here on out, is the *parergon* discussed in *The Truth in Painting* (1978). The *OED* defines “parergon” as “1 An ornamental accessory or addition, esp. in a painting; an embellishment. 2 Subsidiary work or business, apart from one’s ordinary employment. Also, a work, composition, etc., that is supplementary to or a by-product of a larger work.” Why Derrida would be drawn to this idea should be immediately apparent and he tries to draw out as many implications from it as he can. Under the heading of the parergon would fall all manner of phenomena, including frames, titles, emblems, ekphrases (classically considered, think the description of the shield of Achilles in relation to the entire work of *The Iliad*),
matting (*passe-partout*), *mises en abymes*, ornamental details and embellishments of all types, etc. Derrida’s treatment of this concept resembles his reading of the supplement:

Philosophical discourse will always have been *against* the *parergon*. But what about this *against*.

A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [*Il est d’abord l’À-bord*]. (*TP* 54)

In many ways, contemplation of the parergon looks like the inversion enacted by ekphrasis, whereby the essential is subsumed by the non-essential. We can also see how the notion of the parergon encroaches upon the “work” of Bishop’s poems, for example, by way of the titles she chooses, the fluctuating and frequently interchanged perspectival and rhetorical frames she employs, the constant turns both into and out of the work, her temporal shifts from the frozen world of the present to the fluid spaces of memory to the traumatic displacements of historical time, etc. But even further, the parergonal functions like the ekphrastic in challenging us with the reconceptualization of the philosophy of the history of art and of what we mean when we talk about the “work of art”: “When a philosopher repeats this question [(“What is art?” “What it the origin of the work of art?” “What is the meaning of art or of the history of art?”)] without transforming it, without destroying it in its form, its question-form, its onto-interrogative structure, he has already subjected the whole of *space* to the discursive arts, to voice and the *logos*” (*TP* 22).

Philosophy, thus, must start from a position *against* the parergon (to reiterate the above passage) because it threatens the work as we understand it, and more especially because in that *against* is implied the contiguity of the *ergon* with the *par-ergon*. In fact, Derrida
perceives in this fundamental contingency between the work and its “frame” something more threatening, even potentially revolutionary:

It is not because they are detached [that we call them *parerga*] but on the contrary because they are more difficult to detach and above all because without them, with their quasi-detachment, the lack on the inside of the work would appear; or (which amounts to the same thing for a lack) would not appear. What constitutes them as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*. (TP 59)

The argument here is not for the decomposition of all art, nor is it a manifesto for an art of the trivial. But it is an argument about the need to change our conceptions about the relations art is caught up in, about the need to refuse to *work* the art into a self-enclosure. The parergon is that which serves to separate the work of art from and to bring it into contact with the world, both of which are necessary moments for the aesthetic experience or the experience of the aesthetic. But the movement between them, the signification that proceeds from self to other and back again is realized in the passage of the parergon, the work’s very own other.

4.

In the remaining pages of this chapter I will consider one example of a poem that partakes of Bishop’s ekphrastic rhetorical concerns, though it is not usually read in this manner and does not always make this connection explicit. Paying attention to how the ethical encounter privileged by the ekphrastic moment, Bishop’s rhetorical strategies, and the readings elicited by the poem all conspire to demonstrate an ethically motivated political aesthetic, I will be guided by its immediate political contexts not always apparent in Bishop’s strictly ekphrastic poems. Bishop famously wrote to Robert Lowell
in March, 1972, regarding the imminent publication of his sonnet collection *The Dolphin* and its disrespectful use of his ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick’s letters, “*art just isn’t worth that much*” (*OA* 562). Read in context, of course, we recognize this as Bishop’s attempt to save two friends from humiliation and censure, but there is a sense in which this edict has become a governing principle in Bishop scholarship. My intention is to prove this wrong. When it “violat[es] a trust” between human partners, art certainly has its limits (*OA* 562); however, when it works to preserve “the little of our earthly trust,” to ensure “our abidance / along with theirs [others’]” (*CP*, “Poem” 177), then art has the potential to exceed any prescribed limits of morality and achieve a semblance of justice, which may be said to have no value because it determines the meaning of worth as such.

Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502” (1960) has received little attention for the strategies it derives from ekphrastic aesthetics. The poem serves as an illustrative example of the need to theorize the antiekphrastic tradition, because it represents a landscape as a work of art offered up to viewers for pleasing titillation and fantasies of “wealth and luxury” (*CP* 92), even as it sets these perceptions within a centuries-old history of rapacious colonialism, from which the poem struggles to distantiate its representations. That Bishop felt herself implicated in the legacies of colonialism; that she enjoyed the many privileges afforded her as a cultural descendant of the European conquest of the Americas as first a traveler-tourist and then a “foreign-domestic” in the variegated “primitive-modern” society of Brazil; that she stooped at times to judge with her ethnographer’s eye and intermittent racist attitudes—all of these are issues we know her to have struggled with in poetry, correspondence, and life. Two of her favorite works of literature, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*, directly or indirectly
attest and owe their existence to this exploitative historical cultural legacy. Bishop, we grant, was thoroughly aware of the gravity of this cultural legacy and, ultimately, appreciative of both its achievements and atrocities. Yet, she could at times indulge in essentialist racialism, as in this passage from her *Brazil* (1962), written for the Time-Life World Library series:

> Exploding birth rate and high infant mortality rate, great wealth and degrading poverty—these are the two big paradoxes. But along with them come many smaller ones repeating the pattern, overlapping and interacting; passionate patriotism combined with constant self-criticism and denigration; luxury and idleness (or admiration of them) combined with bursts of energy; extravagance and pride, with sobriety and humility. The same contrasts even appear in Brazilian history, periods of waste and corruption alternating with periods of reform and housecleaning. (qtd in McCabe 177)

As Susan McCabe has noted, such moments find discomfiting resonance in Bishop’s poetry as well. Consider, for example, the speaker of “Manuelzinho,” who in being so free with her deprecatory remarks—“Among endless variety,” “[y]ou starve / your horse and yourself” (*CP* 96-97)—is also capriciously aware of her complicity in the structure of powers that determine who gets to eat and by what means:

> And once I yelled at you
> so loud to hurry up
> and fetch me those potatoes
> your holey hat flew off… (*CP* 97)

Cognizant of the impetuous will to coerce social inferiors expressed in this poem, Bishop takes the precaution of deflecting this speech in the voice of another: “A *friend of the writer is speaking*” (96). But given the prevalence of qualifiedly similar passages throughout many of her Brazil poems especially, one may suppose that Bishop’s cultural anthropology is not just endearingly irreverent, but is troublingly essentialist.
Consequently, it is difficult to read a poem like “Brazil” apart from her speculations in prose about the essence of Brazilian culture secreted away in the heart of the Amazon:

The coastal cities, from Belem at the mouth of the Amazon River to Porto Alegre in the south, are filled with 20th Century men with 20th century problems on their minds….Then in the surrounding countryside is a rural or semirural population who lead lives at least half a century behind the times, old-fashioned both agriculturally and socially….Then, if one ventures even a little farther on, one enters the really timeless, prehistoric world of the Indians. (qtd in McCabe 177-78)

One is hard-pressed to separate this modern-day excursion into the interior from the rapacious, militant invasions of the Portuguese colonial “Christians, hard as nails,” which “Brazil, January 1, 1502” ostensibly asks us to spurn. Indeed, both imaginary cultural expeditions are structured by a similar process of denuding, which in the poem takes a particularly murderous turn:

Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L’Homme armé or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself—
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (CP 92)

No doubt, Bishop here engages in a little self-ironizing of her own position as an intrusive outsider, a position which readers are made to share in the poem; yet, it is no less troubling that “Brazil,” situated as it is at the center of the tryptic opening of her collection Questions of Travel (1965), continues to haunt our readings of the poems that draw upon the legacy of colonialist racism and to some extent unveil it—“Squatter’s Children,” “Manuelzinho,” and “The Riverman.” In these poems, Bishop gradually turns
away from the confines of her comfortable life in Rio and Samambaia with Lota de Macedo Soares in order to “penetrate” into the interiors of Brazilian culture.

The irony of the poem’s parergonal adornments, its *lemmata* (another esoteric word evoked by Derrida, which I borrow for its connotations\(^{184}\)), further complicates the issue of how to read the poem’s manifest intentions. The title, which in providing a date so far removed from our contemporary historical purview risks appearing arbitrary, claims our attention because, as in Yeats’s and Auden’s political occasional poems, Bishop’s meticulous facticity in this poem hints at a significant historical substratum. As it happens, January 1, 1502 is neither arbitrary nor manipulated for strategic appeal, but reputedly the actual date that Portuguese explorers first entered Guanabara Bay, alighted, and “founded” Rio de Janeiro, which was later to become a major hub of commerce and the capital city of Portuguese colonial control in the Americas. The epigraph works dubiously on this historical allusion by implying, contrarily, that the poem is a mere art-student’s exercise, what Bishop herself called “the cliché about the landscape looking like a tapestry” (qtd in Kalstone 194). The provenance of the fragmentary quotation—“…embroidered nature…tapestried landscape” (*CP* 91)—and its general significance is frustratingly withheld. It could suggest something as significant as a Shakespearean theme, the weaving of art and life, or simply be strung together phrases having nothing to do with one another. The work cited, “*Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark,” is also a disconcertingly quaint choice. Bishop, as an art student herself, could have selected from any number of other art historians, such figures as E. H. Gombrich or Erwin Panofsky, whom she herself admired and read and whose names would probably have been more familiar to American intellectuals of the time. Camille Roman, apparently
equally frustrated by this poem’s equivocal pretensions to the politically profound and the artistically detached, argues that this poem enacts both a trenchant political critique of the “religious bigotry” manifest in the history of Portuguese Christian colonialism and the World War II “historical ‘moment,’” as well as of post-world war “victory culture” and its complacency with European colonialism (65, 164), but she has little to say about how the aesthetic framing of the poem would facilitate such an interpretation. Zachariah Pickard, on the other hand, attending to the aesthetic “purpose of the poem” “to show how the ‘eye, and ear,’ in Wordsworth’s phrase, ‘half-create’ what they perceive (2:262), how the Christians could cross an ocean and still find ‘it all / not unfamiliar’ and ‘corresponding’ ‘to an old dream’” (182-83), can offer no further suggestions of its political import. If we are to discover an aesthetically-ordered politics here, it will have to come out of this troubling equivocation.

I find “Brazil” to be one of the most perplexing poems in Bishop’s canon because, although its message is not at all unclear, its method—which is precisely what I am seeking—is bafflingly occluded. Most praise awarded this poem stems from the gradual revelation of political themes it purportedly enacts through its reading, and this despite the fact that the political is invoked even before the poem begins and is prevalent as a significant theme throughout. When, for example, Robert Dale Parker praises the ingenuity of Bishop’s use of self-conscious “hindsight” to “unveil what had been developing in the poem so gradually that, probably even before we quite realized, it prepared us to apprehend the rape of both the women and the landscape that the poem ends with” (91), I remain somewhat doubtful. Such readings, which correctly identify the metaleptic process undergirding the poem’s articulation of political themes, too easily
presume a willed ignorance not altogether appropriate to the audience Bishop’s poems evoke. That the opening lines, “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” (CP 91, emphasis added), suggest “that right from the beginning Bishop has feminized nature” (Parker 92), does not reveal itself only after “hindsight,” nor do I find this “metaphor so commonplace that it usually goes unrecognized and taken for granted as natural fact” (Parker 92). Such metaphors, being so conventional, are exceedingly unconventional choices for Bishop and are, consequently, rendered all the more conspicuous in this poem, a marked departure from her usual landscape descriptions. Furthermore, the allegory of the landscape reads flatly from its initial imposition, a fact compounded by Bishop’s tricky shift of perspective from the inconclusive two-dimensional symbolization of the birds to the awkward foregrounding of a moral interpretation of the lizards:

    and perching there in profile, beaks agape,
    the big symbolic birds keep quiet,
    each showing only half his puffed and padded,
    pure-colored or spotted breast.
    Still in the foreground there is Sin:
    five sooty dragons near some massy rocks. (CP 91)

Parker suggests that Bishop’s allegorizing achieves a free-floating irony that is only fully registered as the poem unfolds in time: “Thus by the end, when they [the conquistadores] rip into the fabric, the poem has thoroughly distanced its own perspective from the perspective of the language it still intermittently ventriloquizes” (95). Again, I would suggest this reading is problematic because it does not register the immediate irony of the methods employed by Bishop, which do not turn to temporal narrative strategies to weave a Christian tale of the fall from paradise but, in approximating the aesthetics of tapestry, adhere to the limits of spatial juxtaposition endemic to the medium. Parker only plays up
the static representation of the allegory, expressed through the spatial contiguity of images, rather than submitting it to a temporally realized historical interpretation.

This allegorical stasis is concretized in the final image of the second verse paragraph, which already implicates the political theme of the poem by conflating the ritualized “naturalism” of mating lizards with the impending rape of the indigenous women:

The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes are on the smaller, female one, back-to, her wicked tail straight up and over, red as a red-hot wire. (CP 92)\textsuperscript{185}

The challenge of this particular poem, then, would seem to lie not in engaging its political ramifications after the fact, but in the thinking through of the proleptic quality of its political imagining. Any cursory reading of “Brazil” reveals its commitment to a historical critique of the violent acquisitive legacy of colonialism and its objectification of otherness through the conventional deployment of heterosexually gendered and racialized tropes. But the enactment of this critique entails taking a position outside of the representational strategies through which this legacy is realized; that is, if we read the poem’s “tapestry” retroactively we only re-instantiate the initial colonial violence by figuring it as a foregone conclusion. The violence which the poem attempts to resist is always a past violence: “they ripped away into the hanging fabric.” That same violence is already implicated in any too easily adopted historical critique enacted from a distance, which is precisely why the Portuguese colonials’ perspectives appear to us as “not unfamiliar” (CP 92). Rather than already having ripped away the illusory fabric of the tapestry, Bishop implores us to take the more difficult route of becoming imbricated in the poem’s woven pattern and realizing a political spacing that operates not in accordance
with commitments that precede the subject, but according to a subjective space that attends to the approach of the other, which submits such political commitments to an ethics of justice. We thereby find ourselves once again in the disorienting realm of a critically involuted ekphrastic rhetoric, which the more it cleaves to a faithful representation of its object, the more it opens an anti-representational space for concern for the other.

“Brazil,” therefore, places a demand on its readers to pay attention to its woven nature in order to realize its political justification. Costello makes the astute observation that “[t]he ultimate master in this poem is history, which the travelers, both contemporary and sixteenth-century, attempt to deny and thereby ironically repeat” (Questions 148). If the poem is to reveal this history without repeating its constitutive violence, however, it must remain attentive to how a political interpretation can transfigure this violence by means of an ethical suspension of subjective identification. It does this, I submit, to the degree that it appropriates the aesthetic production of the tapestry. The tapestry, as it was practiced in the medieval and Renaissance periods, was produced as “a figurative weft-faced textile woven by hand on a loom.”

Across a loom are stretched a series of load-bearing threads, running parallel to the finished tapestry’s length, known as the warps. These, Thomas Campbell describes, are interspersed in an alternating pattern to create a gap, known as the shed, which allows for the passage of the colored threads (the wefts). With the aid of various improvised procedures, the warps can then be pulled forward or backward to allow the weaver, or weavers (tapestry craft was often a communal affair), to pass the colored threads in one direction and then another to create the interstitial web that gradually constructs the colored patterns making up the figurative weave of the
textile’s face (Campbell 5). The carefully mechanized procedure that facilitates the meticulous production of the aesthetic object distinguishes tapestry weaving from other visual arts in striking ways, and Bishop remains cognizant of this in crafting her own composition. For example, the methodical interweaving of threads is echoed in her description of the “scaling-ladder vines,” which climb “oblique and neat” into the canopy and back down to “attack” the rocks from “above.” She counts their stitches off: “‘one leaf yes and one leaf no’ (in Portuguese)” (CP 91).

Campbell also notes that art historians have long misinterpreted the tapestry medium because “they have approached the subject as though it were a panel or wall painting, unaware of the extent to which the function and nature of the medium imposed and encouraged aesthetic solutions that were peculiar to it alone and different from those of frescoes, panel paintings, and drawings” (9). As art historians came to evaluate tapestries according to the conventional formalism of other visual arts, these formalisms also at times changed the weaving procedures themselves. Guillaume Janneu excoriates these alien formalist incursions—specifically of painterly technique—as evidence of a decline in the craft toward a “mechanical and subordinate art, slavishly dependent upon that of the painter [...] tapestry is a particular art of interpretation,” Janneu suggests, “which uses painting, but would go radically astray if it sought, as at times it has done, to imitate the effects of painting.”¹¹⁸ In Janneu’s view, the art of tapestry excelled to the extent that its practitioners “submitted of their own free will to its discipline” (9) and did not strive to imitate exactly the cartoons supplied by painters as models for the final product. Tapestry distinguishes itself from the other arts through the work of translation, turning the painter’s fastidious techniques toward a predilection for carefully delineated
patterns and a selectively manipulated palette of colors. Any weaver who forgoes these principles in favor of another aesthetic paradigm, argues Janneu, is liable only to bring off an “insipid” “reprodu[tion]” (11). Bishop playfully acknowledges this tradition of tapestry by drawing upon its limits and its excesses. Although her palette is a good deal more exotic than the “five fundamental dyes” Janneu attributes to the best French tapestry, Bishop’s use of color conforms to the carefully gradated spatial patterns common to representational tapestry:

big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves, blue, blue-green, and olive, with occasional lighter veins and edges, or a satin underleaf turned over; monster ferns in silver-gray relief, and flowers, too, like giant water lilies up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—purple, yellow, two yellows, pink, rust red and greenish white… (CP 91)

Not only does her incremental presentation of colors mimic the contiguous patterns of differentiated surfaces, but Bishop also indicates with technical exactingness the “lighter veins and edges” that help to delineate each surface through the technique of interweaving darker and lighter threads known as “hatching” (Janneu 13). Furthermore, Bishop also reveals the errors to which representational tapestry was prone the more it attempted to attend to painterly details. As Janneu complains, weavers who attempted to reproduce the painted details of cartoons often committed egregious errors through the transposition of images, which resulted in an artificiality in figural “attitudes and gestures” and the reversal of “reliefs…into hollows” (11). Bishop integrates such eccentricities into her patterning through the subtle interruption of sequence (“big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves”), reversals of surfaces (“a satin underleaf turned over”),
and failed attempts at the illusion of depth (‘flowers…up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves’).

Perhaps Bishop’s most crucial application of tapestry technique, however, is her painstaking employment of a woven linguistic fabric that knits together a text and intertext. As we have seen, from the start, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” draws upon two discrete historical moments—the Portuguese explorers’ arrival and Bishop’s own arrival in Brazil—separated by roughly 450 years, which the poem demands that we perceive simultaneously. This woven moment, we might say, is the political context that Bishop and her readers find themselves bound in, the knots which were we to unravel or sever would either unleash the violence here suspended or reduce any relation we might take vis-à-vis the other to mere political theatrics. According to my schematic, Bishop presents to us the “weft” of a shared cultural representation, while carefully concealing or withholding the “warp” of its historical construction. This “warp” is never revealed, except perhaps at the start of the second verse paragraph, where Bishop describes a transparent “blue-white sky,” its “simple web, / backing for a feathery detail” momentarily giving the glimpse of a loose stitch. The benefit of this concealment, which is nonetheless constitutive of the woven representation itself, is that it underscores that we cannot be outside of history or, expressed yet another way, that history can never be outside of us. If history were extractable from the process of representation it could be used to exonerate a colonial worldview that would sacrifice the other to a progressive narrative of European supremacy; or it could be used to interpose between myself and the other centuries of contingency to the end of absolving me of responsibility. Moreover, as
we know and are reminded at the end of the poem when the fabric is “ripped away,” history is indeed continuously submitted to such reduction.

But Bishop’s crucial point here is that the object of violence disclosed in this rape is “retreating, always retreating” and that, no matter how much we have succeeded at minimizing our obligation to others, “those maddening little women who kept calling, / calling” still demand our responsibility. Therefore, the political finds its ethical justification only in the integral weave of history and representation, an enfolded simultaneity of time and space which Bishop sustains throughout the poem by strategically varying her grammatical tenses in a way that always foregrounds the need to enact this justice. Here at the close of the poem, after the tapestry has suffered seemingly irreparable damage, the political is re-stitched around the calls that still resound from a retreating violent past. In a parenthetical aside, Bishop prefigures the restoration of the woven political space by asking rhetorically, “(or had the birds waked up?)” Not only does this question suppose voices where before there were none (“the big symbolic birds keep quiet”). It also opts for the less common grammatical variant waked, which has the result of mixing the tenses of past perfect with a merely figural future to give the illusion of a continuous present. The poem’s opening also plays productively with tense, enfolding “Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” into the singly significant “Januaries,” which not only renders the discrete historical moments indistinguishable, but again situates the poem in a woven simultaneity of time and space, making it “fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame” (CP 91). Finally, but perhaps most significantly, the turning point of the entire poem stresses the contiguity of historical space-time, and not its insurmountable distance or merely metaphoric
resemblance. When Bishop draws the conceptual link between the animal lust of the lizards and the Portuguese explorers, she chooses not to state “As once before the Christians…” or even “As the Christians,” but aptly writes “Just so the Christians…” (CP 92). This expression in no way exonerates them or extricates their actions from the political reading of history being offered; rather, through the spatial juxtaposition of the two sets of figures (lizards and colonials) and the two historical moments (1502 and 1952), the poem draws an analogy between the two moments in history. The result is to open up the deliberative space of the political, the subject of which cannot shirk her responsibilities by any claim to historical exigency, but must remain vigilant to the call of others and be willing to answer for the violence that would eclipse that call.

“Bishop’s questions of travel are not only psychological and epistemological but political, especially for the North American,” writes Costello in words that corroborate my reading of “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” “The poems in the Brazil section of Questions of Travel,” she summarizes, “all deal with the ironic quest for a new Eden by forms of culture and consciousness that inherently defeat that ideal. The ideal itself, [Bishop] shows us, denies the separate identity of the worlds encountered, and founders when confronted with it” (Questions 139). For Costello, Bishop learns to mediate this particular divide between “inherited” aesthetic ideals and the contingent realities of “the sensible world” through poetic description. These strategically employed ways of seeing, what she calls the practice of “excursive sight,” allow Bishop to venture forth in imagination to an embattled political space that helps bridge the gap between “monumental” aesthetic forms and “domestic” particularities (Questions 138-39). What I have been arguing throughout this chapter, and this study as a whole, is that such imaginative ex-cursion (a
concept that discloses a weak and a strong sense), which begins in the ethical sacrifice of
the self’s autonomy to the other, and which initiates the move toward political
accountability before all others, is best understood within the rhetorical category of
ekphrasis, in its broad sense. Ekphrasis, understood in this broad rhetorical sense of the
mediation between poetic representation and its other, functions as an operative sign for a
justified poetics, which in its critical reflexivity is self-subsuming and responsible. As we
have seen in the poems “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem,” in its traditional manifestation,
the ekphrastic poem as verbal representation takes as its other a visual representation. In
her extensive practice of a justified poetics, however, Bishop often displaces her
ekphrastic rhetoric onto less ontologically conceived others, often to expressly political
ends. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” that other is conceived as a particular historical reality
of colonialism and the populations that were made to suffer its violent programs of
material acquisition and cultural appropriation.
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NOTES

INTRODUCTION:
2 I have not been able to corroborate this particular anecdote, though it sits comfortably alongside the numerous romanticized narratives of the Soviet-era literary underground and samizdat culture. In his memoir, *The Oak and the Calf* [1975] (Harper and Row, 1980), Solzhenitsyn describes his early practices of writing “invisibly”:

   As I finished one piece after another, at first in the camps, then in exile, then after rehabilitation, first verses, then plays, and later prose works too, I had only one desire: to keep all these things out of sight and myself with them.

   In the camp this meant committing my verse—many thousands of lines—to memory. To help me with this I improvised decimal counting beads and, in transit prisons, broke up matchsticks and used the fragments as tallies. As I approached the end of my sentence I grew more confident in my powers of memory, and began writing down and memorizing prose—dialogue at first, but then, bit by bit, whole densely written passages. My memory found room for them! It worked. But more and more of my time—in the end as much as one week every month—went into the regular repetition of all I had memorized. (3)

3 Among other favorite anecdotes, Solzhenitsyn reputedly created these “decimal beads” out of chewed bread and “recited” them like rosary beads. This prayerful literary practice also calls to mind the camp-minded self-sacrificial act, evoked throughout Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*, of depriving oneself of fulfillment to nourish another; e.g., “To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-one-self, is to take the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting” (*OTB* 56).

7 See Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Blackwell, 2006) and *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge UP, 1985), especially the Appendix I, “Postmodernist Poetics Unfair to Modernist Poetry,” in which Altieri attempts to erect a defense against postmodernist critical charges that modernist poetry cannot represent a “vital sense of life,” variable modes of human agency, the social and psychological powers of poetry, or a politics not moored in conservative values (380-85). In *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Altieri asserts that all the major modernists experienced substantial crises about their work and about their lives in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I think the sense of crisis stemmed primarily from their growing fears that the constructivist aesthetics on which they had come to rely made it impossible to develop sufficient frameworks for identifying with those suffering from social injustice…

   I am not arguing that constructivist modernism lacked a sense of history or an empathy with social conditions produced by industrial capitalism. On the contrary, it might have had too rich, or at least too fine, a sense of history because it was obsessed by a compelling need not just to account for itself historically but to find from within history direct energies and patterns which might better equip individuals to deal with what seemed inescapable dark times. But constructivist models of expression now seemed incompatible with the rhetorical stances necessary for convincing others that in fact something might be done to increase social justice. (7-8)

He reads, in a dialectical move that I agree with, the later generations of modernists as trying to preserve many of the constructivist principles of early modernism while also returning to a more nuanced practice of adopting and configuring rhetorical strategies to meet social demands. The reader may also like to consult Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge UP, 1994) and Thomas Travisano, *Mid-Century Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (UP of Virginia, 1999) for their cultural contextualizations of, respectively, high modernism and late modernism/early postmodernism.

5 The critical theories of poetic autonomy against which later criticism has reacted by reemphasizing historical, moral, and psychological concerns is often attributed to a number of diverse, but similarly motivated mid-century figures such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, F. R. Leavis, and Northrop Frye. The reader may wish to consult Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Cornell UP, 1988), in which he makes the compelling argument that the poetics of autonomy espoused by these critics actually served the ethical function of preserving the author from criticism by shifting autonomy from the realm of the human to the linguistic.

6 In my view, postmodernism can be used to great effect as a critical term for theorizing the rejection or challenge of certain modernist principles, but I generally avoid it as a definitive historical term. Whether understood to have begun with the outbreak of World War II, with the concentration camps, with the atomic bomb, or with the rise of the Cold War, postmodernism seems to encapsulate a critical drawing into question of and dependence on modernism that I am reluctant to conceptualize as a definitive epochal break. If I use the term “late modernist” as an admission of my hesitance, I do not therefore exclude the use of “postmodernist.” For example, I find Thomas Travasano’s careful employment of the term in *Midcentury Quartet* (UP of Virginia, 1999) very effective because he defines “a” postmodern aesthetic that is very attentive to the historical realities experienced by these four poets, while nevertheless avoiding any constrained historical definition. He writes that, “despite their own significant claims to historical priority, what this quartet of poets eventually created was not ‘the’ postmodern aesthetic but ‘a’ postmodern aesthetic. Theirs is one of the earliest and most persistent of the several distinctive, powerful, and often contradictory aesthetics that has striven to ‘replace modernism’” (9).


8 J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (Columbia UP, 1987). Miller offers many formulations of his thesis throughout the text, though in his lecture on de Man he recapitulates that, “By ‘the ethics of reading,’ the reader will remember, I mean that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and the further effects, ‘interpersonal,’ institutional, social, political, and historical, of my act of reading” (43). Miller notes the apparent contradiction in this formulation that “It would seem that the act of reading as such must have little to do with ethics, even though the text read may make thematic statements which have ethical import, which is not at all the same thing. Reading itself would seem to be epistemological, cognitive, a matter of ‘getting the text right,’ respecting it in that sense, not a matter involving moral obligation” (43-44). Through his reading of de Man, however, he asserts that “‘ethnicity’ is a necessary dimension” of all allegories of the impossibility of reading and, consequently, “ethnicity is as first as any other linguistic act...[E]thical judgment and command is a necessary feature of human language” (46).

9 See Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford UP, 1990) and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon P, 1995); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (U of California P, 1988). Tobin Siebers does not conform to either of these readings, but focuses instead on two “issues where ethics and criticism consistently join”: “the role of the human in literature and criticism” and “their preoccupation with conflict...[or] ‘violence’” (2, 6). His concept of ethics, which stresses human character and preservations of the human against violence, is expansive enough to confirm “that linguistic pluralism evolves as an ethical response to the perception that social language is repressive and violent;” however, he believes that de Man’s and Miller’s “creation of an isolated linguistic morality robs ethical theory of its social context and renders ethics ineffectual” (Siebers 38-39). Other works performing the turn to ethics in criticism are too extensive to name, but a partially representative list would include, in addition to those already mentioned, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics* (U of Chicago P, 1992); Robert
Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh UP, 1997); and Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *The Turn to Ethics* (Routledge, 2000).


12 Lawrence Buell, “‘What We Talk about When We Talk about Ethics,’” in Garber, Hanssen, and Walkowitz, *The Turn to Ethics* (Routledge, 2000), 1-13, 7. Buell suggests that the extent of Levinas’s influence over literary critics “remains to be seen,” particularly to the extent that a Levinasian ethical criticism would be able “to fuse a revised version of a deconstructionist vision of the impossibility of reading with a revised version of Booth’s book as friend: the other for whom we feel responsibility prior to any awareness of it” (7). Others for whom Levinas plays a guiding role include Harpham, Ziarek, Eaglestone, and R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), all hereafter cited in the text. For probably the most succinct description of Levinas’s ethical philosophy, see Emmanuel Levinas, “‘Ethics as First Philosophy’” (1984) in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Blackwell, 1989), 75-87, hereafter cited as EFP.

13 On “critical ethics” or “ethics as critique,” see R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), especially 19-24. While there is some right to the claim that Levinas’s ethics is problematically suited to the labor of “pragmatic praxis of politics,” Spargo argues, the Levinasian project nonetheless displays universalist aspirations…specifically insofar as ethics demands, at least implicitly, a critique of systemic political practices and calls furthermore for redresses in the realm of justice that must necessarily be systemic. Treating a range of vaguely situational scenarios that seem as readily locatable in historical circumstances of extreme injustice, Levinasian ethics is not simply reformatory, seeking redress for the contingently determined disfranchisement of those who suffer in the present moment, as though their suffering were accidental and systematically unpredicted. Instead, Levinas consistently refers us to those who were never franchised, to the victims occupying a realm that is, from an existential perspective, not in any way temporary or merely the product of the social malfunctioning of injustice. (VM 23-24)

See also Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*.


15 Altieri argues that modernists professed two “refusals of basic values in the culture they inherited,” epistemological and psychological in nature. “One could call the second ‘ethical,’” he submits, “if the rubric had not been horribly cheapened by overuse.” This second refusal he describes as the resistance to “‘entrenched values’” and “‘entrenched personality types that the culture established in order to preserve those values’” (Altieri 4). This resistance manifested itself in a psychology Altieri calls “constructivist expressionism” (5). In *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Cornell UP, 2003), in which he attempts to theorize a method of reading the “affective dimensions of experience” in place of sociopolitical and ethical readings that tend to overdetermine meanings in the text, Altieri reveals his openness to a Levinasian revaluation of ethics. In reading the affective significance of mood through a discussion of Heidegger, Altieri includes the following note:
I think the stakes in this discussion will be more dramatically present if we keep in the background some concepts developed by Emmanuel Levinas in his speaking about those aspects of subjective life that do not quite seem in the agent’s control. Levinas clarifies why it is a severe limitation in philosophy to make the subject the center of epistemic practice without attending to the ways that the subject is first called toward what it tries to master…And the subject is necessarily incomplete to the extent that its position as mastering subject depends on responding to such calls. Perhaps a full appreciation of subjectivity requires acknowledging that incompleteness and pursuing its implications. (267 n18)

Blasing’s preoccupation in Politics and Form is obviously political, but in her more recent publication, Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words (Princeton UP, 2007), she returns to a consideration of how poetic, linguistic, and psychoanalytic theory enlighten our views of the historical production of the speaking subjects of lyric poetry. In this, she projects a movement toward the ethical in her thinking.

16 Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in Notes to Literature, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia UP, 1991), 37-54. Adorno’s reading of lyric is also cited by Spargo in Ethics of Mourning as central to his conception of lyric economy, although he resists its conventional interpretation as “a reduction of the responsibilities of the public sphere to a private set of relations, which is then universalized and set back into the public sphere” (85). Instead, he reads yet another dialectical turn in which the lyric voice often resists the lyric’s “work of narrowing the field of ethical relevance” to enact a critique of its own economy (86).

17 See T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (Faber and Faber, 1957).

18 Spargo and Ramazani differ crucially in their historical readings of anti-elegy. According to Spargo, “There is a risk…that in characterizing anti-elegy as peculiar to the modern moment, we might underestimate the degree to which anti-elegiac protest is inherent in the traditions of elegy almost from its inception, and also the extent to which modern currents of anti-elegy are indebted to an internal dialectic of elegy with a pointedly ethical trajectory. Indeed, we might argue that elegies are modern to the degree that they are anti-elegiac, rather than vice versa” (131). This corrective, if I understand it correctly, is equally apt in describing the ekphrastic or, more rightly, the interartistic tradition from which it derives, namely in that it has for centuries consisted of two primary strains: the Sister Arts (ut pictura poesis), in which the arts coexist harmoniously, and the Paragone, in which the arts rival each other. Analogous to Ramazani, however, I perceive a mid-century turn toward the paragonal in the arts (especially in the particularly fervid reappraisal of G. E. Lessing’s Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry), but I do not believe this has to discount a historical reading of larger scope of an internal dialectical turn within the tradition.


21 One cannot ignore Ruth Webb’s trenchant critique in “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre” (Word & Image 15.1, 1999) that the classical definition of ekphrasis did not designate a poem about a work of art but a more generalized rhetorical canon of descriptive poetics. See also Janice Hewlett Koeb’s The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature (Palgrave, 2006) for an extensive reapplication of this classical understanding of ekphrasis. Nevertheless, I do not think that these late modernist poets’ employment of ekphrasis, even as it challenges institutionalized frameworks, can be totally separated from the more familiar, received twentieth-century definition. Instead, my reading builds on the pioneering works of W. J. T. Mitchell and, more recently, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, who both attend to the rhetorical uses of ekphrasis for placing lyric poetry in the social world and particularly how ekphrasis can stage reflections on the ethical and political concerns. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other;” Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (U of Chicago P, 1986); Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (U of Chicago P, 1994), hereafter cited as Mitchell, Iconology, and Picture; and Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts (Cambridge UP, 2008).
these writers invoke Lessing and reapply his ideas, in the case of the first two, or reclaim them, in the case of the Other, occurs in Lessing's Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry [1766] (Johns Hopkins UP, 1984). “The classic expression of ekphrastic fear,” writes Mitchell, in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” “occurs in Lessing’s Laocoön, where it is ‘prescribed as a law to all poets’ that ‘they should not regard the limitations of painting as beauties in their own art’” (698). The prescriptive nature of Lessing’s treatise places him at the forefront of the paragonal tradition as Mitchell defines it. Lessing argued that the visual arts (“painting”) and literature (“poetry”), because they are expressed in different sensual media, should represent subjects formally appropriate to the rules of their media. The visual arts employ spatial forms and, therefore, should opt for subjects conceived in instants of time. Literature employs language unfolding in time and, therefore, should focus on actions and narrative forms to convey its subjects.


25 I also have in mind here the idea implicit in Mitchell’s reading that ekphrasis can promote ideological awareness. In Iconology, he writes, the relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and world, signs and their meanings…What are we to make of this contest between the interests of verbal and pictorial representation? I propose that we historicize it, and treat it, not as a matter for peaceful settlement under the terms of some all-embracing theory of signs, but as a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse itself. The point, then, is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what powers and interests it serves. (43-44)

Ekphrasis, as the poetic practice that forces us to reflect on this very split would seem to foster this kind of ideological critique.

26 Loizeaux, for example, writes, Mitchell’s paragonal model has been less satisfying, however, when it comes to understanding, or even recognizing, such modes, and profound, feelings as companionship or friendship, the terms in which poets often describe their ekphrastic motives. It has been difficult to move beyond the appealing drama of paragone, with its plot of conflict and uncertain victory. But under its lens every ekphrastic relationship looks like linguistic appropriation, every gesture of friendship like co-option, every expression of admiration a declaration of envy by the word for the unobtainable power of the image. (15)


27 See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry [1766] (Johns Hopkins UP, 1984). “The classic expression of ekphrastic fear,” writes Mitchell, in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” “occurs in Lessing’s Laocoön, where it is ‘prescribed as a law to all poets’ that ‘they should not regard the limitations of painting as beauties in their own art’” (698). The prescriptive nature of Lessing’s treatise places him at the forefront of the paragonal tradition as Mitchell defines it. Lessing argued that the visual arts (“painting”) and literature (“poetry”), because they are expressed in different sensual media, should represent subjects formally appropriate to the rules of their media. The visual arts employ spatial forms and, therefore, should opt for subjects conceived in instants of time. Literature employs language unfolding in time and, therefore, should focus on actions and narrative forms to convey its subjects.

of Wimsatt. At the end of his essay, Wimsatt calls for greater discrimination in the theorization of artistic genres and eschewing temptations to view the artistic mediums as similar: “I must confess that my earnest hope is that such terms as we’ve been discussing [media, interpretation, mélange, parallels] will never clarify or harden into any kind of determinate or literal validity for literary criticism” (54-55).

Interesting to note as well is the eminent art critic Clement Greenberg’s appropriation of Lessing in “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Partisan Review (July-August 1940), reprinted in John O’Brien (ed), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1 (U of Chicago P, 1986), 23-38. After an historical survey of the development of “purism” in the arts of the avant-garde, Greenberg suggests that in order “[t]o restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized” (32). “The history of avant-garde painting,” he further submits, “is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium,” out of which he derives a claim for “the present superiority of abstract art” (Greenberg 34, 37).


29 See Jill Robbins, Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature (U of Chicago P, 1999), a sustained examination of Levinas’s ambivalent relation to literature. Other works that have demonstrated how Levinas can be applied to literary questions and whose aid in my own thinking has been inestimable include Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Blackwell, 1992); Robert Eaglestone, Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas (Edinburgh UP, 1997); Gerald Bruns, “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writing,” in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, The Cambridge Companion to Levinas (Cambridge UP, 2002); and R. Clifton Spargo, The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004).

30 This is a critical reading of elegy that Spargo makes in conjunction, especially, with the ethical thought of Bernard Williams, though as he makes clear in this section of the book Levinas and Williams share in this view of ethics in extremity and responsibility without end. I do not read Williams, but I make use of Spargo’s extrapolations for my readings of Levinasian ethics in conjunction with late modernist poetry.

31 See Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction, particularly chapter 2, section 6, pp. 88-97. He defines the general pattern of this reading strategy as a two-stage process: “First, the text is engaged in a repetition of its internal exigencies through an act of ‘commentary’. Second, within and through this repetition, an ellipsis, or moment of alterity, opens up within the text which allows it to deliver itself up to a wholly other reading. It is of vital importance to emphasize that the moment of alterity, the ellipsis within the text, is glimpsed only by giving oneself up to textual repetition. The ellipsis is the space within repetition” (89).

“ADD THIS TO RHETORIC. IT IS TO ADD”:

32 “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” in The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (Vintage, 1951), 169. Subsequent references will occur in the text as NA. References to The Collected Poems will occur in this chapter as CP and those to Opus Posth. as OP. References to Letters of Wallace Stevens (Knopf, 1966) will occur as L.

33 This is now a fairly commonplace position established by the most influential works in the field. The central conceit is most indebted to Harold Bloom’s seminal Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Cornell UP, 1977), but this problematic has been advanced by a number of works, including Joseph N. Riddel’s The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Louisiana State UP, 1965), Helen Vendler’s Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen out of Desire (U of Tennessee P, 1984), Milton J. Bates’ Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self (U of California P, 1985), and Frank Lentricchia’s chapter on Stevens in Modernist Quartet (Cambridge UP, 1994). Some of the more recent works that take particular interest in assessing Stevens’ social engagement include Marjorie Perloff’s “Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric” in Albert Gelpi (ed.), Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (Cambridge UP, 1985), James Longenbach’s Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things (Oxford UP, 1991), Alan Filreis’ Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, & Literary Radicalism (Cambridge UP, 1994), Angus J. Cleghorn’s Wallace Stevens’ Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric (Palgrave, 2000), Jacqueline Vaught Brogan’s The Violence Within / The Violence Without: Wallace
Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics (U of Georgia P, 2003). Any subsequent references to these works will occur in the text.

34 Ragg has in mind Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Melita Schaum as proponents of the former position and Marjorie Perloff as leading the latter. He suggests that the former view is not really attentive to Stevens’ views as they developed throughout his career and tend to lead to reductive, “politically-correct” readings of the poems. Regarding the “poetics of resistance,” Ragg advises against arguing with Perloff on her own terms of “resistance,” which I feel is not quite accurate. Stevens spoke of “resistance” as early as 1936 in “The Irrational Element of Poetry” and continued to make use of the idea throughout his prose criticism, albeit with more nuance regarding escape and the apolitical than perhaps Perloff allows. Regardless, one must acknowledge that Ragg’s inquiry into how and why Stevens developed his language is exactly Perloff’s position in “Revolutioning in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric.”

35 Gerald Bruns demonstrates incredible foresight on this issue by calling for a turn away from epistemological/linguistic criticism toward hermeneutics in “Stevens without Epistemology” in Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge UP, 1985). As he remarks, such a turn would concern “what to do about other people” and the “problem of alterity rather than one of intersubjectivity” (Bruns, Stevens 25-26). Simon Critchley argues in Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Routledge, 2005) that Stevens’ poetry casts the problem of epistemology “in a way that lets us cast it away” (4). His twofold thesis is that Stevens’ poetry serves a critical task, in “permit[ting] us to see fiction as fiction,” and a therapeutic task, in giving to life the fictions that allow us to conceive it (Critchley, Things 58-59). Other critics who argue that Stevens’ poetics extend beyond epistemological concerns to have moral or ethical implications include Angus Cleghorn in Wallace Stevens’ Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric (Palgrave, 2000), Milton J. Bates in “Pain Is Human: Wallace Stevens at Ground Zero” in Southern Review 39.1 (Winter 2003) and “Stevens’ Soldier Poems and Historical Possibility” in WSJ 28.2 (Fall, 2004), and Harold Kaplan in Poetry, Politics, & Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens & Williams (Transaction, 2006). These works will hereafter be cited in the text.

36 The study of ekphrasis as a rhetorical practice has been advanced by two scholars. Murray Krieger first formulated ekphrasis as a literary principle in his article “Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoon Revisited” (1967) and later expanded his ideas in Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign (Johns Hopkins UP, 1992). W. J. T. Mitchell offers the farthest reaching insight in Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (U of Chicago P, 1986) and in “Ekphrasis and the Other” in South Atlantic Quarterly 91.3 (Summer 1992). James Heffernan is critical of Krieger’s approach in Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery (U of Chicago P, 1993) because he sees this literary principle as “stretch[ing] ekphrasis to the breaking point…to the point where it no longer serves to contain any particular body of literature and merely becomes a new name for formalism” (2). While I agree that Krieger takes his principle too far and seems to conflate the rhetoric with the genre, Mitchell has clearly shown the value of focusing on the rhetorical engagement of verbal and visual media and how it can serve as a focal point onto configurations of otherness. Whereas Mitchell has more recently focused on the visual arts, my hope is to extend this latter study more thoroughly into poetic practice.


38 See Murray Krieger’s Ekphrasis, pp. 78-80, for a helpful review of the historical misreading of this phrase from Horace’s Epistle to the Pisos (Ars Poetica). He shows that this phrase was only fully embraced by Renaissance artists as a justification of the pictorialist tradition and that it was most likely not granted the same authority in Classical times that we now give it.

The Levinas Reader (Blackwell, 1989), 129-43. Subsequent references will be to RS. Stevens

50 See Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969) and Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Harvest Books, 1951/1994). In “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that “the introduction of aesthetics into political life” increases humankind’s “alienation [to] such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (242). In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt writes of the central role totalitarian movements accorded political fictions in the seizure and maintenance of power: “Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations” (353).


52 Originally published in Les Temps Modernes 38 (1948), 771-89, the essay is reproduced in Sean Hand (ed), The Levinas Reader (Blackwell, 1989), 129-43. Subsequent references will be to RS. Stevens

40 In the Oct. 5, 1949 letter to his art dealer, Paule Vidal, Stevens gives the name Angel Surrounded by Peasants to the Pierre Tal-Coat picture, Still Life, she had acquired for him. He interprets the scene in a brief allegory: “The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it” (L 650). Stevens quickly extended this allegory into a poem about the angel of reality. For the development and interpretation of this poem, see his letters to Paule Vidal on Sept. 30, Oct. 5, and Oct. 31 (L 649-50, 655-56), Nicholas Moore on Oct. 13 (L 650), Victor Hammer on Oct. 19 and Nov. 9 (L 651, 656), Barbara Church on Oct. 25 (L 653-54), and Sister M. Bernetta Quinn on May 29, 1952 (L 752-53). See also Altieri’s “Why ‘Angel Surrounded by Peasants’ Concludes The Auroras of Autumn” in WSJ 32.2 (Fall 2008): 151-70.

41 See Bonnie Costello, “Effects of Analogy” and Planets on Tables as well as Charles Altieri, Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry and The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry.


43 Murray Krieger’s Ekphrasis probably still stands as the best summary of the tradition of the natural sign aesthetic and its hierarchy of the arts.

44 According to his theory of poetic crossing, Bloom designates the failure of the poem as “forgetting again the Whitmanian lesson of Hoon and of the woman at Key West, which was ‘Chant to yourself in solitude’ (Climate 119).

45 Bloom borrows the following formulation from Paul de Man to outline his theory of poetic crossing in the book’s coda: “In the terms I employed in Poetry and Repression, ethos is a reseeding and pathos a reaiming, with the middle positions between them in the dialectic of revision being taken by logos as a re-estimating or re-estimating. Rhetoric, conceived as a text or system of tropes, is an ethos, while rhetoric as persuasion falls under pathos, with an aporia between them as logos” (382).

46 The tendency seems to be to follow Bloom in calling “The Man with the Blue Guitar” Stevens’ first major poem and its realization a kind of stylistic leap of genius. Some readers are now beginning to reconsider the extent to which “Owl’s Clover” shaped Stevens’ later style.

47 Originally published as “Turnmoil in the Middle Ground” in the Oct. 1, 1935 issue of New Masses, the review was reprinted along with Burnshaw’s retrospective on the event as “Wallace Stevens and the Statue” in Sewanee Review 69 (Summer 1961): 355-66.

48 Ezra Pound, Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound (New Directions, 1990), 111.


50 See Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969) and Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Harvest Books, 1951/1994). In “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that “the introduction of aesthetics into political life” increases humankind’s “alienation [to] such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (242). In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt writes of the central role totalitarian movements accorded political fictions in the seizure and maintenance of power: “Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations” (353).


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53 The Levinas Reader (Blackwell, 1989), 129-43. Subsequent references will be to RS. Stevens
was well-read in current periodicals, including a number of French ones, but his reading habits slowed considerably in his later years because of difficulties with his eyes. There is no evidence that Stevens was familiar with Levinas, though he did seem to maintain a working knowledge of continental philosophy, including that of Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom Levinas is known to be responding in this essay. Joan Richardson writes that in the early months of 1948 Stevens did request copies of a number of periodicals from his French art dealer, Paule Vidal (Later Years 308). It is possible, but unlikely, that Stevens came across this essay in his reading. My point, however, is not to establish influence between these two figures but to demonstrate what I perceive to be similar ethical concerns in their responses to contemporary aesthetic philosophies.


55 R. Clifton Spargo, Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death (Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 59, hereafter cited in text as VM. For more on the immemorial and the significance of the Holocaust in Levinas’s work the reader may also wish to consult John K. Roth (ed), Ethics after the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses (Paragon House, 1999) and Michael Bernard-Donals, “In Memorium: Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Immemorial” in Mosaic 40.3 (2007), 1-16.

56 For more on Stevens’ use of qualified assertions and the “as if,” see Vendler’s “The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens” in The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Johns Hopkins UP, 1965); see Bates’ discussion of Stevens’ use of the ‘as if’ derived from the philosophy of Nietzsche and perhaps Vaihinger in Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self (U of California P, 1985), 201-03; and Brazeal’s “Wallace Stevens’ Philosophical Evasions” in WSJ 31.1 (Spring 2007).

SPEAKING OUTSIDE OF SPEECH:


59 Karl Shapiro, Essay in Rime (Random House, 1945), 41.


63 Several scholars have traced the thinking of Levinas and Derrida back to the Holocaust despite the fact that both seem to have taken care not to make use of it in their philosophical works as a dominant representational theme. See for example Geoffrey H. Hartman, The Fateful Question of Culture (Columbia UP, 1997) and Robert Eaglestone, The Holocaust and the Postmodern (Oxford UP, 2004). For a specific account of Levinas’s indebtedness to the Holocaust see R. Clifton Spargo, Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death (Johns Hopkins UP, 2006).


66 A number of critics have noted Auden’s committed response to the modernist and, through it, the Romantic traditions despite his repudiations of it. Here I draw largely on Altieri’s account, but also see
John R. Boly, *Reading Auden: the Returns of Caliban* (Cornell UP, 1991), who argues that despite Auden’s revolts against the Romantic tradition and its authoritarian cult of the poet/writer he quite often replicated these disciplinary impulses in order to strategically craft a free-thinking, rebellious reader (auditor); and David Rosen, *Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry* (Yale UP, 2006), who claims that Auden successfully disavowed the visionary rhetoric of Romantic and modernist predecessors as a discourse of power, but failed to fully interrogate the use of the low register for similar ends because of his unquestioning allegiance to a plain-spoken civic role in his poetry.

67 See T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in Frank Kermode (ed), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (Harcourt Brace & Co./Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 37-44. Eliot makes a claim that bears quite a bit of semblance to the ethical poetics I am advocating: “What happens [in the act of poetic creation] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (40). Rarely, however, is this “something which is more valuable” defined as an ethical obligation to the other. The sway of self-immolation Eliot describes tends toward renewal of the self, a more autonomous self, a strongly guarded transcendence to “poet” through the sloughing off of personality. This stands as another example of the uninterrogated modernist attitude that precludes any laying bear of its own self-interest, which of course does not mean that Eliot cannot be read ethically, or even that he would dissuade us from such a reading. In this context, see Tobin Sieber’s argument, in chapter three of *The Ethics of Criticism*, that the New Criticism’s rampant anti-biographicism in its many forms was often deployed to preserve the autonomy of the poet-man and leave him to his devices, free from criticism.


69 The idea of a speech of exposure necessarily draws on the concept of *aletheia* (the absence of covering up or hiding). Heidegger uses the term to designate the Truth that is wrested from the world by the process of Being. In “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger attributes the opening to otherness that is Truth to “poetry.” Of course, the emphasis on exposure should also draw parallels to Levinas whose tropes of nakedness illustrate the self’s exposure to the other, persecution by the other, without recourse to the sanctity of egoism. For a concise discussion of the relatedness of these two positions, see Robert Eaglestone’s “Against Historicism: History, Memory, and Truth” in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford UP, 2004).

70 As should become more apparent, my thinking on this twofold nature of a return to rhetoric in late modernist or postmodernist poetry is heavily indebted to Levinas’s theoretics of language, particularly his notions of the Saying and the Said, which find their fullest expression in *Otherwise than Being* (Duquesne UP, 1998). The Saying may be summarily defined as the exposure to the other that conditions the possibility of speech. As such, it is an ethically performative dimension of language that cannot be reduced to constative propositions. The Said, on the other hand, is that which can be ascertained as meaning in language; it is the language of ontology. These two modalities, one reluctantly says, occupy the same speech without coexisting. According to Levinas’s radical conception the ethical moment is an-architical, it occupies the hither side of any being and therefore can only be ascertained through its trace, a fleeting absence. As a result, one discerns the Saying as an ethical trace within the Said; however, it cannot be known except through the Said, and therefore by betrayal. For that reason, I argue that poets like Auden confront the ethical as a kind of torsion within rhetoric whereby they try to resist the representational thrust of language to emphasize the prior condition of relation that grounds their language. Despite drastic differences in terminology, my argument should also reveal a deep indebtedness to John R. Boly’s *Reading Auden: the Returns of Caliban* (Cornell UP, 1991), hereafter cited in text. He argues that reading Auden is embarking on a journey of poetic dialogics whereby the inscriptions in language dissimulated by the disciplinary forces of genre, persona, and other poetic conventions are revealed to the engaged auditor. Like him, I retain an emphasis on the devoted rehearsal of the text to reveal its prior investiture in an arche-language, which I take to be ethically grounded, in Levinas’s sense of “an ethics of ethics” and not a disciplinary model of conventional morality. See also Simon Critchley’s discussion of *clôture* reading in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Blackwell, 1992).

Nemerov's greater knowledge of the art he reads than of the poetry.

This reading would of course leave Auden vulnerable to David Rosen's charge that he never successfully interrogated the use of the low register as a discourse of power because of his commitment to a plain-spoken civic tradition in poetry. For reasons that will become apparent I do not agree with Rosen's reading of Auden's stance vis-à-vis the low register.

These remarks on “Spain” are necessarily brief. I will have occasion to provide a more nuanced reading of “Spain” later in the chapter in connection with Auden's ethical reappraisal of historical narratives.

In addition to Fry, a number of other theorists discuss this or similar qualities of lyric. See for example Katë Hamburger’s assertion in The Logic of Literature (Indiana University Press, 1973) that lyric

is not, like mimetic literature, involved in constructing its own reality but is, in the phenomenological sense, pre-intentional and does not serve a practical purpose. More recently, Mutlu Konuk Blasing has argued in Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words (Princeton University Press, 2007) that lyric poetry “offers an experience of another kind of order, a system that operates independently of the production of the meaningful discourse that it enables” (2). Out of the materiality of words, Blasing continues, lyric “foregrounds a linguistic nonrational” that is the ground for the critical development of rational and professional discourses of various kinds (3).


That Nemerov suggests Auden is incapable of giving up his conception of the artist as “a maker of vineyards” in favor of Brueghel’s more disfigurative aesthetic of the “lingering curse” I have to attribute to Nemerov’s greater knowledge of the art he reads than of the poetry. Demonstrating such insight on Auden’s poem throughout “The Flight of Form: Auden, Bruegel, and the Turn to Abstraction in the 1940s,” I find it disheartening that Nemerov displays such overt misreadings of Auden as to suggest that he unequivocally agreed with Rilke that poets “cannot be helpful [by] concerning ourselves with the distresses of other, [except] in so far as we bear our own distresses more passionately” (802), or that he takes at face value the closing lines of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” as Auden’s artistic manifesto. Nemerov clearly overlooks a great deal of Auden’s later poetry and how it would be helpful for explication of his theme. He implies that Auden didn’t have the foresight to represent the lingering curse or to perceive the most startling detail of the painting: “a light-colored ovoid shape in the woods at the edge of the field—a shape that turns out to be, on close inspection, a human face looking up, features visible: the head of a corpse” (803). Obviously, Nemerov is forgetting Auden’s poem’s like New Year Letter and Horae Canonicae in which the lingering curse and the murdered corpse figure so persistently. If “Musée des Beaux Arts” did not quite show the sophistication that Nemerov intuits, it surely is not to the detriment of Auden who had the foresight to clarify a tradition in art that would later help him to realize this critical function of art. For that reason, I suggest that Auden participates in the aesthetics from which Nemerov excludes him: “True artistic style is a matter of ‘discrepancy,’ to use Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s word of 1944—an allowance of the odd and alien amid an otherwise too-secure aesthetic mix. The grooves of a smooth and

72 Daniel Swift of the Times Literary Supplement remarks on October 5, 2001 that Auden’s poem is rapidly circulating and has appeared in the editorial sections of at least four newspapers (17). Stephen Burt and Milton Bates also muse on the popularity of this poem in responses to 9/11/01.

73 See Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (U of California P, 1950/1969). I will also later reference Burke’s Attitudes toward History (U of California P, 1937/1984). Subsequent references will be to Rhetoric and Burke, respectively.

74 See Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Harvest Books 1951/1994) and Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (Avon Books, 1941/1969). See also Slavoj Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? (Verso, 2001) for a notable discussion of how the concept of totalitarianism has been used less as a descriptive term than a prescriptive discourse to secure the dominance of liberal democratic traditions and minimize or liquidate the possibility of revolutionary resistance from leftist intellectuals.

75 See Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, (trans) Albert Hofstadter (Perennial Classics, 2001), 15-86. Heidegger drafted “The Origin of the Work of Art” between 1935-37 on notes from lectures he had given in the 1930s, but the text was not published until 1950. Being a Germanophile, it is possible that Auden read some Heidegger in the 1930s, Mendelson suggests, but it is more likely that his first contact with Heidegger’s ideas were through Sein und Zeit in the mid-1940s and more thoroughly in 1948 and 1949 (Early 354n/Later 316). See Edward Mendelson, Early Auden (Viking, 1981) and Later Auden (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), hereafter cited as Early and Later.

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meticulous translation must be simultaneously Adorno’s ‘fissures that occur in the process of integration.’ Contra Auden, the most regenerative refinement—the most blessed resurrection—must always be a caving in, a grave, a gap, beatific with ‘unsuccess’” (804, Nemerov is quoting from The Dialectic of Enlightenment and Aesthetic Theory).

81 The young critic Christopher Caudwell, who died in the Spanish Civil War, charged Auden with an inappropriately nihilist adoption of Marxist principles in Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry (International Publishers, 1955). George Orwell, in 1940’s “Inside the Whale,” praised “Spain,” a poem Auden later discarded from his collected poems as dishonest, for its revolutionary spirit, but admonished him for his approval of “necessary murder.” For a good review of the criticisms Auden faced around this time regarding his politics and defection see Stan Smith’s introduction to The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden (Cambridge UP, 2004), 5-7, hereafter cited in the text.

82 This review can be found in Randall Jarrell, Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 36. Subsequent references will occur in the text as KA&C. Jarrell’s essays “Changes and Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry” and “Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden’s Ideology” are collected in The Third Book of Criticism (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), hereafter cited as TBC.


84 See Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature, especially chapter six, “The Bad Conscience of American Holocaust Elegy: The Example of Randall Jarrell.” Spargo orients his reading by Jarrell’s critical response to Auden, which seemed to have an innervating rhetorical effect on the poetry of the former. I hope my reading helps to demonstrate further the productive rhetorical influence Auden exerted over Jarrell. For more on Levinas’s occasional references to bad conscience and their suggestiveness for ethics, see the second chapter, “The Unpleasure of Conscience,” in R. Clifton Spargo, Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death (Johns Hopkins UP, 2006).

85 I do not wish to suggest that the pathetic fallacy is not still operative in the poem, but that it fails in its attempt to justify the poetic vision and therefore complete the imaginative work of mourning. For a further discussion of Auden’s transformation of the elegiac genre, see the relevant chapter in Jahan Ramazani’s Poetry of Mourning (University of Chicago Press, 1994). For a discussion of how the process of mourning revolves around an ethical crux and how elegiac literature is thus conducive to ethical inquiry, see R. Clifton Spargo’s The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

86 Auden did revise the wording for his Collected Poems to “it survives / In the valley of its making…” (CP 248). The revision, with its suggestion of poiesis, perhaps better exemplifies the great number of means available to the poet in the creation of his art, such as, among many others, the rhetorical amplification I have been addressing; however, the vocality stressed by the original wording of Another Time has a compelling ethical valence to it as a signification that underlies and is somehow sonorously traceable within the harmonic threads of the poetic voice.


88 The substitution of this sacred, religious narrative for a literary, mythic one, of an Hebraic tradition, is a figure that Levinas develops in En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger (Paris: Vrin, 1949). It becomes a central figure for understanding his ethical critique of the Western philosophical tradition.

89 See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, “What is the question to which ‘substitution’ is the answer?” Cambridge Companion to Levinas (Cambridge UP, 2002) and R. Clifton Spargo, Vigilant Memory (Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), particularly chapter three, “Where There Are No Victorious Victims.”


“HIS GESTURES ARE FULL OF FAITH IN—OF FAITH”:

96 Earlier criticism on Jarrell was established by such influential works as Suzanne Ferguson, The Poetry of Randall Jarrell (Louisiana State UP, 1971) and Suzanne Ferguson (ed), Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell (G. K. Hall & Co., 1983), as well as William Pritchard, Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990) and Richard Flynn, Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood (U of Georgia P, 1990). A resurgence in critical attention to Jarrell has been growing in promising ways over the last decade and half. See especially James Longenbach, Modern Poetry after Modernism (Oxford UP, 1997); Thomas Travisano, Midcentury Quartet (U of Virginia P, 1999); Alan Williamson, Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification (U of Virginia P, 2001); Stephen Burt, Randall Jarrell and His Age (Columbia UP, 2002); R. Clifton Spargo, The Ethics of Mourning (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004) and “The Ethical Uselessness of Grief: Randall Jarrell’s ‘The Refugees’” in PMLA 120.1 (2005), 49-65. Specific references to these works hereafter will occur in the text.

97 See the chapter “Lyrical Economy and the Question of Alterity” in Ethics of Mourning, esp. 81-92, and Spargo’s application of this reading to Jarrell’s “The Refugees” in “The Ethical Uselessness of Grief.”
98 Originally published, respectively, in The Southern Review, Autumn 1941 and Partisan Review, Fall 1945, both essays can be found in The Third Book of Criticism (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), hereafter cited as TBC. Other works by Jarrell cited in this chapter are The Complete Poems (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), cited as CP; Kipling, Auden & Co. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), cited as KA&C; Poetry and the Age (U of Florida P, 2001), cited as PA; and Randall Jarrell’s Letters (U of Virginia P, 2002), cited as L.
100 The first series of lectures can be found in The Language of Poetry, ed. Allen Tate (Princeton UP, 1942). For a brief discussion of Randall Jarrell’s participation in this lecture series and the loss and subsequent recovery of his lecture (provisionally titled “Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry”) see Thomas Travisano’s “Randall Jarrell’s Poetics: A Rediscovered Milestone” in Georgia Review 50 (Winter 1996): 691-96. Jarrell’s lecture can be found in that same issue, 697-713, and in Poetry and the Age, expanded edition (Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida), 272-94. These will be cited hereafter as Milestone and LO, respectively.
101 Stephen Burt and Hannah Brooks-Motl have attempted to restore these lectures for posterity from the extensive notes that Jarrell left behind him. Their efforts can be found in Randall Jarrell on W. H. Auden (New York: Columbia UP, 2005). Characteristically, although two lectures draw heavily on Jarrell’s earlier essays, the remainder of the lectures shows Jarrell’s close familiarity with all of Auden’s work, including the work of later years which he sometimes disparaged.
105 Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analisis” (1917), The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 16, 428. In Freud’s works, “ambivalence” is recurrent theme of identification that conforms to the rivalry typical of the family romance. By the time he writes “The Ego and the Id” (1923), he had come to see the successful navigation of the Oedipus complex as dependent upon a crucial balancing act of ambivalent attitudes toward both parents with the end of resigning the appropriate object-cathexis, depending on the sex of the child. This model makes it difficult, however, for Freud to theorize the outcome of the Oedipal attitude in girls particularly and leads him to undermine his focus on ambivalence by presupposing an inherent bisexuality in children: “It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry” (E&I 23). That Freud makes such an admission and then goes on to speak of the Oedipus complex as a universal
sexual phase that results in the psychic precipitate of the super-ego, despite his qualms, should encourage us to be wary of any totalizing theory of identification. Judith Butler clearly advises against such theoretical leaps in *Gender Trouble* (1990/99), noting that Freud’s concepts of sexual disposition are exclusively based on heterosexual aims. The troublesome possibility of inherent bisexuality in children can be explained away according to the Oedipal model because “bisexuality is the coincidence of two heterosexual desires within a single psyche” (77). Therefore, drawing a one to one ratio between ambivalent identification and Oedipal desires should be discouraged because it situates the whole notion of identification in the “heterosexual matrix” and doesn’t allow for the possibility of alternative causes of ambivalence. Bloom extrapolates from the anxiety experienced under the sway of a foreboding predecessor an entire theory for the production of “major” poetry based in large part on ambivalence and its sublimation (see *Anxiety of Influence*).

These two distinct theoretical insights have proven quite productive in the study of identification, but the totalizing reach of their practice has also proven misleading and oppressive. Certain unflattering readings of Freud fail to acknowledge the tenuous experimentalism of psychoanalysis and merely repeat simplified “truths” about the human psyche, which to Freud was a processual and historical construct. Complacency leads to the formulaic: childhood ambivalence leads naturally to the Oedipus complex, the nature of the Oedipus complex leads of course to ambivalent identifications. And following Bloom’s theory of influence to its conclusions, we are left with a rather bleak picture of a poetic tradition in decline from some past and irrecoverable golden age to an increasingly fragmented and belated present and further derivative future. Ambivalence to preceding generations and influence, according to the schematics of these two theories, leads to little more than a reification of the cultural ideals, whether they are sexual or literary in nature, of the past. What is lost is the promise of differentiation that inheres in ambivalence, the possibility for a productive swerve away from the predecessor that is not merely conducive to a fall but to a creative ascent.

107 Quoted in Ian Sansom, 278. Taken originally from Alan Ansen’s “Notebook 3” about a 1947 conversation with Stringham (Berg Collection) and Eileen Simpson’s *Poets in their Youth: A Memoir* (New York, 1982).  
108 Two early critical pieces which exemplify this vicarious attack on Auden are “Poets: Old, New, and Aging,” originally published in *The New Republic*, Dec. 9, 1940, and “The Rhetoricians,” also published in *The New Republic*, Feb. 17, 1941. In the former, Jarrell accuses Frederic Prokhosh of adopting many of Auden’s topoi and stylistic manners, mostly his faults, and is therefore able to criticize the elder through the younger poet. In the latter, Jarrell lays out his claims against the overwrought, mechanical rhetoric that he would make the center of his critique of Auden in “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry” later that year. In this piece he is reviewing Conrad Aiken and Raymond Holden. Both *New Republic* pieces can be found in *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-64* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980).  
109 Originally published in *The Nation*, Feb. 21, 1942, “The End of the Line” is reproduced in *Kipling, Auden & Co.*, 76-83. References will be to this text.  
110 Jarrell begins the essay with the proviso that “if the reader understands me to be using *romantic* as an unfavorably weighted term, most of what I say will be distorted. Some of the tendencies of romanticism are bad; some of the better tendencies, exaggerated enough, are bad; but a great deal of the best poetry I know is romantic. Of course, one can say almost that about any of the larger movements into which critics divide English poetry; and one might say even better things about the ‘classical tradition’ in English poetry, if there were one. (It is not strange that any real movement, compared to this wax monster, comes off nowhere; but it is strange that anyone should take the comparison for a real one)” (KA&C 76). The broadly sketched quality of the latter part of this proviso may suggest that Jarrell is among those who believe the idea of a ‘classical tradition’ to be largely a fiction. Literature, by this conception, became a cultural tradition only with the rise of the notions of statehood and shared national culture, and romanticism, conceivably, would be the culminating movement of this realization.  
111 For an interesting discussion of how the strategic use of metrical inversion and irregularity enhances poetic signification see Nigel Fabb’s *Language and Literary Structure: The Linguistic Analysis of
Many critics have recognized the peculiar compromise Jarrell makes with Auden in this poem ostensibly written in defiance. In *The Poetry of Randall Jarrell* (Louisiana State UP, 1971) Suzanne Ferguson writes, “Auden’s conception of ‘indifference’ in the old masters and Jarrell’s of ‘abstract understanding’ in the new finally come to almost the same thing” (197). Ian Sansom concurs and suggests that the rewriting of “Musée” that is “The Old and the New Masters” “demonstrates Jarrell’s profound dependence on Auden as a role-model and father-figure who must be resisted but who cannot be denied” (287). See also Stephen Cheeke’s discussion of these poems in the chapter “Suffering” in *Writing for Art: the Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester UP, 2008). My reading of “The Old and the New Masters” is indebted to all of their discussions.

“Freud to Paul” was originally published in *Partisan Review* in fall 1945. It is reprinted in *The Third Book of Criticism* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1969), 151-87. John Boly has written, regarding the critical influence of this essay, “Its idea of a three-step development, from personal, to social, and then back to personal (religious) concerns, has furnished a framework that both Auden’s defenders and detractors have been obliged to accept” (40). It perhaps is becoming more apparent now that Jarrell’s schematic, written in 1945, may not fully acknowledge the achievement of Auden’s later years. Even the newly available notes from Jarrell’s 1952 lecture series on Auden reveal more nuanced readings which account for Auden’s ongoing production and it is clear that Jarrell never gave up reading Auden. One might easily imagine adding a fourth ideological category to Jarrell’s limited scope (e.g., “Bourgeois Auden”: the Auden of *About the House* [1965]) whose domesticity and pastoralism focus on the processes of aging and give a back seat to religious concerns, which one might typify as “Roman Catholic in an easygoing Mediterranean sort of way” ([*The Dyer’s Hand*](https://www.columbia.edu/columbia/)).

Letter to his first wife Mackie Jarrell quoted in Pritchard’s *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 99. Other letters reveal the extent to which Jarrell connected the immense innocuousness that was life in the army with the political terrors of an age of national antagonism between totalitarian states. In a letter to his old love interest, Amy Breyer de Blasio, dated July 22, 1943, Jarrell writes, for example: “I get more political every year; the army makes you more so, and confirms all your hardest beliefs. This you is strictly me: 99 of 100 of the people in the army haven’t the faintest idea what the war’s about. Their two strongest motives are (a) nationalism, pure nationalism (they find it easy to believe that German generals are paid $30 a month—they find it easy to believe anything about foreigners) and (b) race prejudice—they dislike Japanese in the same way, though not as much as, they dislike Negroes. They feel neither gratitude nor affection for our allies—they’d fight Russia tomorrow, for instance. They have no feeling against the Germans—they dismiss all information about them as ‘propaganda.’ This propaganda is their one response, frightening and invariable, to anything they haven’t always known (and they have known almost nothing). The innocent idealism and naive whipped-up hatred (which collapsed into fraternizing when it really encountered the enemy in the first World War) were a good deal better than this. I believe nationalism, so far from dying out as people once believed, is going to reach heights it’s only in isolated cases attained before—in the first World War there was a real queer feeling of solidarity between the ‘workers’ of the opposing armies; how little of that is left” ([L 103-04]).

Jarrell’s feeling of intellectual isolation while in the army clearly encouraged him to evaluate questions of totalitarian states. In a letter to his old love interest, Amy Breyer de Blasio, dated July 22, 1943,

Jarrell writes, for example: “I get more political every year; the army makes you more so, and confirms all your hardest beliefs. This you is strictly me: 99 of 100 of the people in the army haven’t the faintest idea what the war’s about. Their two strongest motives are (a) nationalism, pure nationalism (they find it easy to believe that German generals are paid $30 a month—the contrary they think anything about foreigners) and (b) race prejudice—they dislike Japanese in the same way, though not as much as, they dislike Negroes. They feel neither gratitude nor affection for our allies—they’d fight Russia tomorrow, for instance. They have no feeling against the Germans—they dismiss all information about them as ‘propaganda.’ This propaganda is their one response, frightening and invariable, to anything they haven’t always known (and they have known almost nothing). The innocent idealism and naive whipped-up hatred (which collapsed into fraternizing when it really encountered the enemy in the first World War) were a good deal better than this. I believe nationalism, so far from dying out as people once believed, is going to reach heights it’s only in isolated cases attained before—in the first World War there was a real queer feeling of solidarity between the ‘workers’ of the opposing armies; how little of that is left” ([L 103-04]).

Jarrell’s feeling of intellectual isolation while in the army clearly encouraged him to evaluate questions of audience when it came to writing on ethical subjects.


“Mr. Jarrell Replies,” letter to *The New Republic*, March 1941, *Randall Jarrell’s Letters*, ed. Mary Jarrell (U of Virginia P, 1985), 42. This letter was written in response to Malcolm Cowley’s “Poets as Reviewers” (Feb. 24, 1941) to Jarrell’s review “The Rhetoricians” (Feb. 17, 1941). Being called out on his attack of rhetoric, Jarrell wrote, “I wasn’t attacking rhetoric (an old friend), but the ornamental and empty romanticism of the particular rhetoric in *And in the Human Heart*” ([L 42]).

This is the general definition of the rhetorical practice of ekphrasis devised by W. J. T Mitchell and espoused by James A. W. Heffernan. See Mitchell’s “Ekphrasis and the Other” in *South Atlantic Quarterly Review* 91.3 (1992), 693-719 and Heffernan’s *Museum of Words: the Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (U of Chicago P, 1993).
In Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (U of Chicago P, 1986), W. J. T. Mitchell writes of speaking about the idea of images and image production while rarely indulging in the illustration: “It is a book about images, therefore, that has no illustrations except for a few schematic diagrams, a book about vision written as if by a blind author for a blind reader. If it contains any insight into real, material pictures, it is the sort that might come to a blind listener, overhearing the conversation of sighted speakers talking about images. My hypothesis is that such a listener might see patterns in these conversations that would be invisible to the sighted participant” (1). Mitchell’s purpose is certainly different from mine, but I am drawing a loose analogy between our attitudes to suggest that the modernist practice of ekphrasis can and should be engaged critically through a devout attention to the literary side of the equation whereas often the works of art providing the inspiration for the poetry make up the focus of the discussion. I do not wish to disparage ekphrastic criticism that pays attention to the art. This is a necessary practice and I hope to build on that foundation, but I do argue that the sheer proliferation of ekphrasis in the twentieth century compared to previous centuries has less to do with the art than with the aims of the poetry itself. I qualifiedly agree with Heidegger, writing in “What Are Poets For?”, that “before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time’s destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence ‘poets in a destitute time’ must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry” (PLT 94). One outcome of modernism in poetry is that poetry becomes its own question, and that question is necessarily ethical to the degree that poetry has to answer for its right to be.

118 See “Randall Jarrell’s Poetics: A Rediscovered Milestone” in Georgia Review 50.4 (1996), 691-96, for a discussion of Travisano’s discovery. A text of the essay follows this short description, 697-713.

119 Travisano places a great deal of critical weight on this essay as evidence of a theoretical center to Jarrell’s criticism, one that is best described as postmodernist in contrast to the modernist New Critical practice then coming to critical prominence. While I am not opposed to such an argument, and even embrace many of its claims, I don’t necessarily regard this essay as a keystone of Jarrell’s criticism. I think “Levels and Opposites,” like “The End of the Line” before it and most of Jarrell’s criticism, is purposefully antagonistic to theoreticism. Jarrell is a consummate dialectician and, like the first dialectician, Plato’s Socrates, is fond of undercutting his own arguments and emphasizing the tenuousness of our rhetorical positions. Notice, for instance, the Socratic tone of Jarrell’s closing remarks in “Levels and Opposites”: “Anyone who has written much poetry knows how pathetically inadequate our knowledge of structure is; how infinitely more he does as a poet than he knows as a critic...[O]rganization, in its widest sense, is more difficult and—almost—more important than anything else in the poem, because it more nearly than anything else corresponds to the whole that is the poem” (713). In a lecture on structure, Jarrell gestures at the impossibility of knowing about structure. And then, after laying out a well-articulated argument for reading the poem as a process, not as a structure, he claims that organization may be the theme that brings us closest to knowing the unified structure of poem as a “whole.” Jarrell’s arguments are extremely cagey and I would suggest, in general, that his criticism is more often aimed at providing correctives and enhancements to our reading practices rather than directives or definitive statements.


121 Reference will be to Laocoön, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Johns Hopkins UP, 1984).

122 The phrase and its obverse are indeed old: it is Leonardo da Vinci’s Renaissance formulation of the balanced and mutual deprivations and dependence of the arts. But it is based on an older phrase: Plutarch’s “painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking picture” (second century CE). This formulation gives subtle advantage to poetry, and it is the advantage evoked by Sir Philip Sidney A Defense of Poetry (1580). Lessing conforms to the older tradition. See Stephen Cheeke’s discussion of the paragon in Writing for Art (Manchester UP, 2008), 20-21.

123 See Kevin Hart, The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy (Cambridge UP, 1989) for a discussion of deconstructive critique of rationalism, or the interpretive reading of the non-metaphysical within metaphysics, with reference to the domain of the theological.

124 See “Ethics as First Philosophy” in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand (Blackwell, 1989), 75-87, for a summary of Levinas’s objection to Western philosophy’s representational schematic which sanctions
its own “truth” according to that with is already in its grasp and which systematically suppresses any possibilities of being or knowing otherwise.

127 Zygmunt Bauman, Postmodern Ethics (Blackwell, 1993), 34.

128 I want to stress at this juncture that I do not in any way mean to say that the visual sign is somehow more oppressive or ideologically suspect than the verbal. I would consider my views on the matter most nearly to resemble those of Mitchell, who in Iconology, aligns himself with the conventionalism of Nelson Goodman, but with the clear caveat that it is necessary to wrestle with ideological matters and to recognize that these will necessarily shape our notions and uses of images and texts. He writes, “The boundary line between texts and images, pictures and paragraphs, is drawn by a history of practical differences in the use of different sorts of symbolic marks, not by a metaphysical divide” (Iconology 69). In other words, I merely wish to suggest that as the culture of rationalism came into crisis, the “visualism” it privileged came under suspicion. This “visualism,” however, is not at all a direct reflection of the essential nature of the image but a reflection of the historically-bound conventions of dealing in and interpreting images, which could just have easily been manifest in the practice of textuality; i.e., language and visual representation share in being convention-bound sign-systems. The study of ekphrasis from the side of the image and visual culture can and should be expounded as well, and it is equally necessary for understanding the realities of representation during the mid-twentieth century. One should, of course, not overlook the imperialisms of the text at this time as well.

129 In contrast to the paragonal theory, which emphasizes the conflict between the arts and the hierarchical struggle for dominance, stand the “sister arts” theory, which emphasizes inter-artistic comparison, such as imagined in Horace’s phrase from Ars Poetica (c. 20-12 BCE), “ut pictura poesis” (‘as is painting, so is poetry’). Critical dominance seems to rest now with the paragonal theory, but some recent critics have attempted to consider how even given the paragonal relation of the arts we can still imagine a relationship of difference build on fealty. Stephen Cheeke, for example, writes: “If the relationship between poetry and painting is best thought of not in terms of sisterly bonds at all but rather as one of radical difference or alterity, then this will take on various manifestations at specific historical moments….Sometimes the encounter with alterity takes on a special charge when it is not merely an occasion for the discovery of difference but a place of relation and therefore of the possibility of exchange” (6). I retain the idea of “sisterly” in my text to suggest that this relation can be one of difference, as between the sexes (i.e., “sister-oriented”), as well as one that is familial. Loizeaux also writes from this perspective: “Mitchell’s paragonal model has been less satisfying, however, when it comes to understanding, or even recognizing, such modest, and profound, feelings as companionship and friendship, the terms in which poets often describe their ekphrastic motives” (15). Later, in words that more closely resemble my somewhat less traditional approach to ekphrasis, she describes her book as “less concerned with ekphrasis as the genre that tries to imitate the image or the still presence of the work of art and more with ekphrasis as the genre that negotiates a relation to that other” (16). It is unfortunate, however, that she gives up her earlier focus on ekphrasis as a rhetorical practice rather than a genre as I feel it can detract from her aims. Likewise, Cheeke suggests that his book is aimed at stretching “what we are actually prepared to think of as ekphrastic writing” (7). His idea of doing this, however, is to incorporate poetry and prose written about paintings and photographs. While this is obviously necessary, I feel like the visual side of ekphrasis still dominates the discussion and limits our understanding of its function as a rhetorical practice.


131 For example, the very next poem in Selected Poems is “The Face” (CP 23) which obviously follows through on the themes that occupy the closing lines of “The Knight, Death, and the Devil.” This poem can also be considered “ekphrastic” in intent as it responds to the opera Der Rosenkavalier. While strictly speaking this is an example of intertextuality—and I do not wish to do away with the necessary distinction between these two domains of rhetorical practice—once ekphrasis begins to be perceived as questioning the process of representation itself, it necessarily encroaches as a rhetorical practice upon other “genres” of text. This will become more apparent later in the chapter as I examine the interplay of Jarrell’s ekphrastic practice and his intervention into the modernist dramatic monologue.

132 The reader may want to consult other expert readings of this poem for greater insight. See of course Suzanne Ferguson’s reading in The Poetry of Randall Jarrell (Louisiana State UP, 1971), 181-84; also Richard Flynn’s in Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood (U of Georgia P, 1990), 95-97; and of course Stephen Burt’s in Randall Jarrell and His Age (Columbia UP, 2002), 227-30.
To my knowledge, only Ferguson (1971) and Sister Bernetta Quinn in her book Randall Jarrell (Twayne Publishers, 1981), discuss this poem at any length, and neither specifically invokes the ekphrastic tradition.

Sister Bernetta Quinn’s epistolary association with Jarrell during his life and her reverence for the source of his poems prompts her to track down the actual references, which are not of primary importance to the poem. According to Mary Jarrell, the references are to the following: “God / Being tickled by the Madonna” is Agostino di Duccio’s Virgin and Child, which is actually located in Florence but in the poem is place in some undesignated museum in the U.S. (Quinn 87); the artworks in the second stanza are located in the Terme Museum in Rome—the “Ludovisi Throne” is an altar-piece known as such and which pictures the same scene of the “Birth of Venus,” while the “smashed / Head of the crouching Venus” is a nearby statue of Aphrodite (Quinn 87-88); the reference of the third stanza is to the Madonna of the Pietà in the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona, which shows the detail of a tear of Mary shining on the arm of the crucified Christ (Quinn 88).

There is a striking resemblance between the attitudes toward the visual arts of Jarrell’s guards and the three phases of fascination with ekphrasis that W. J. T. Mitchell enumerates in “Ekphrasis and the Other,” although they are transposed. The first phase is called “ekphrastic indifference” and stems from the common assumptions that the translation of an artistic message from one medium to another is to some extent impossible because of the material constraints of each medium (696). The second phase is “ekphrastic hope,” which represents the overcoming of this impossibility through imagination or metaphor. At this point, “ekphrasis ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation, and begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression. This is the point in rhetorical and poetic theory,” Mitchell elaborates, “when the doctrines of at pictura poesis and the Sister Arts are mobilized to put language at the service of vision” (697). These two phases seem to clarify the attitude of the second and third guides in “In Galleries,” the latter erring more toward hope and the former toward indifference. Mitchell calls the third phase “ekphrastic fear,” which “is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than…a natural fact that can be relied on” (697-98). At this point the resistance to ekphrasis again returns, not as indifference but as an invested ethical position, so as to maintain against collapse the differences between verbal and visual representation. Lessing might serve as a good example of this moment, though it is suggested that most modern examples of ekphrasis are characterized by this ambivalence. The first guard of “In Galleries” might serve as an extreme example of this stage or of indifference. I should mention that I think Loizeaux incorrectly faults Mitchell’s theory as unwelcoming to discussions of friendly ekphrastic motives (15). She does not fully appreciate that Mitchell’s three phases are not necessarily sequential nor are they unidirectional. Although he presents them in a familiar sequential narrative, he clearly implies that the third stage sends the interpreter back into the ekphrastic fray. Furthermore, he states that “[t]he central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called ‘the overcoming of Otherness’” (699) which suggests that the paragonal oscillation between hope and fear in the ekphrastic genre, if viewed from the standpoint of indifference alone, may be understood as antagonistic toward social others. Mitchell is quite clear, however, on the need to start not from the false premise of indifference but from ambivalence: “Ekphrastic indifference maintains itself in the face of disquieting signs that ekphrasis may be far from trivial and that, if it is only a sham or illusion, it is one which, like ideology itself, must be worked through. This ‘working through’ of ekphrastic ambivalence is, I want to suggest, one of the principle themes of ekphrastic poetry, one of the things it does with the problems staged for it by the theoretical and metaphysical assumptions about media, the senses, and representation that make up ekphrastic hope, fear, and indifference” (702-03). Thus, while we must always be attentive to the paragonal nature of ambivalence, one can hardly speak of ambivalence that does not also allow for friendly as well as hostile intentions toward the Other.

This description bears similarities with Heidegger’s depiction of aletheia in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” The work of art discloses the essence or being of what it represents and thereby facilitates a happening of truth (PLT 32).

This argument is mostly an amalgamation of views created over the years of Jarrell’s reception. In a location that has stayed with us, Robert Lowell remarked on Jarrell’s “wild dogmatism” in his review of The Seven-League Crutches. And even as they have quite frankly acknowledged the personality and eccentricity of Jarrell’s criticism, readers, such as Helen Vendler, never failed to remark on his facility in taste or his authority on the canonical (see Vendler’s review of The Third Book of Criticism in The New York Times Book Review, 4 January 1970, reprinted in Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell (G. K. Hall & Co,
The view that professes the paradox that Jarrell was so radical in his dissent from the critical currents of his time and that he was nevertheless uncritical in his reverence for the “old masters” in the later poetry and cultural criticism (e.g., “A Sad Heart at the Supermarket” or “Against Abstract Expressionism”) is one that several recent scholars, namely Stephen Burt, Richard Flynn, Nelson Hathcock, R. Clifton Spargo, and Thomas Travisano, have attempted to reconcile. All of these readers argue in various forms for a more integrated approach to Jarrell’s poetry and criticism in order to show how many of the socially progressive ideals expressed in Jarrell’s poetry also inform his criticism.

Cf. Mitchell in *Iconology*: “The resistance to the interartistic comparison, to the study of the ‘sister arts,’ runs deeper, however, than mere professional insularity. What I am suggesting here is that the comparative study of verbal and visual art would be leavened considerably by making this resistance one of its principal objects of study, instead of treating it as an annoyance to be overcome. Such a shift in perspective might help us define more clearly just what is at stake in the incorporation of one medium by another, what values are being served by transgressions or observances of text-image boundaries” (156). This quote counters Loizeaux’s resistance to Mitchell’s “paragonal” view of the arts by showing that Mitchell sees himself as interrogating the intersection of both the paragonal and sister traditions of art. While he may argue that the paragonal theory has more validity in describing the actual historical relations of the arts, he does not dismiss the sister arts tradition but interrogates it for its own ideological validity. I am suggesting that Jarrell had come to this realization much earlier and had put it to ethical use in his poetry.

In addition to the third chapter on “Lyrical Economy and the Question of Alterity” in *The Ethics of Mourning* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), see also Spargo, “The Ethical Uselessness of Grief: Randall Jarrell’s ‘The Refugees,’” *PMLA* 120.1 (2005), 49-65.

In this instance, Spargo pays especial attention to the conventions of the sestina that Jarrell employs for “The Refugees.” That Jarrell frequently mediated on various forms of lyric economy to the end of cultural critique is especially apparent from the manner in which we learn to read him, as a poet of repetition. The resurfacing of “Levels and Opposites” and Jarrell’s conception of the dynamic movement of poetry versus the static conception of the poetic object propounded by the New Critics has probably had the most impact on learning to read Jarrell for his repetitions—another unfortunate indication of the academy’s refusal to take Jarrell’s poetry seriously before his criticism. James Longenbach and Stephen Burt have offered helpful reflections on Jarrell’s use of repetition, but for a detailed discussion see Ellen Bryant Voigt’s “Lost and Found,” which offers a very helpful discussion of Jarrell’s use of strategic lexical and syntactical repetitions (*Southern Review* 38 [2002]: 377-98).

Though it does not offer literary analysis, David Payne’s *Coping with Failure: the Therapeutic Uses of Rhetoric* (U of South Carolina P, 1989) offers a compelling argument for treating failure not as the end of study but the beginning of the rhetorical statement of the problem and the search for solutions. See also Ewa Płonowska Ziarek’s discussion of failure in the discourse of modernism in *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (State U of New York P, 1996).

As a young man and beginning poet, Jarrell suggested in a letter to Allen Tate (April 1939) that he had “a poetic and semifeminine mind,” a conception that he had occasion again to corroborate as defense against his mentors’ (Ransom, Warren, and Tate) criticisms that his poetic efforts were uneven and often “limp” (see correspondence with Tate, December 1940, in *Letters*, 29-33). That this conception was based on Jarrell’s own prescribed notions about gender is obvious and it had various effects on his most important early readers. Though Lowell praised “A Girl in a Library,” he suggested that Jarrell’s monologues were not always dramatically true to their subjects or audience, but somewhat ventriloquized as “Robert Frost for ‘the man who reads Hamlet,’ or rather for a Hamlet who had been tutored by Jarrell” (*Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell*, ed. Suzanne Ferguson, G. K. Hall & Co., 1983, 28). Bishop was uncomfortable with Jarrell’s “understanding and sort-of-over-sympathizing with the lot of women” and expressed her consternation with the female personae in his poems in her correspondence with Lowell (David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, New York, 1989, 226). In her review of the *Complete Poems*, Helen Vendler wrote, “For all his wish to be a writer of dramatic monologues, Jarrell could only speak in his own alternately frightened and consolatory voice, as he alternately played child and mother,” suggesting what others had already noted, that Jarrell often infantilized his characters, especially women (*Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell* 39). James Longenbach treats of this theme in his chapter on Jarrell in *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (Oxford UP, 1997). He argues that “Jarrell was not so interested in prescribing a voice for women as developing a socially
respectable way of coming to terms with his own divided sensibility” (50). While this may indeed have some truth to it, it doesn’t counteract the fact that Jarrell’s gender politics are at times questionable and deserve a comprehensive study. I believe his view of women is often expressed ambivalently, at times displaying an animosity and the tendency to prescribe and control the role of women (which may have much to do with his relationship with his mother and his unresolved feelings about his own ‘divided sensibility’) and at others expressing a genuine moral wish to depict and honor the experiences and perspectives of his social others. Jarrell’s use of gender as a construct, therefore, can be rehabilitated for an ethical praxis of poetry but not without a thorough interrogation of its potentially violent and violating manifestations.


144 For an account of Jarrell’s collegiate interest in gestalt and object theory psychology see chapter one of Pritchard’s biography. Stephen Burt and Alan Williamson also discuss the relation of this psychological interest to Jarrell’s poetry. See, respectively, Randall Jarrell and His Age (Columbia UP, 2002) and “Jarrell, the Mother, the Märchen” in Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification (U of Virginia P, 2001).


146 W. S. Graham used these words to describe this poem and the type of poetic language use it typifies in his review of Jarrell’s volume Losses (Poetry 72 [1948]: 302-11. It has been reprinted in Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell (G. K. Hall & Co, 1983), 21-24.

147 The following discussion should reveal the extent to which I have been influenced by the idea of “intersubjectivity” as it is presented in Stephen Burt’s Randall Jarrell and His Age. My argument is very much in the spirit of Burt’s conception of Jarrell’s “interpersonal style.” As he writes, “Jarrell’s style responds to the alienations it delineates by incorporating or troping speech and conversation, linking emotional events within one person’s psyche to speech acts that might take place between persons” (22-23). I refrain from duplicating his terminology, however, because my focus is a little different. My discussion tries to maintain a distinction between voices and persons. Although the subjectivities or consciousnesses in Jarrell’s poems ideally refer to his desire to preserve the integrity of personhood, they are still, practically speaking, tropes. By insisting on calling them “voices” I want to underscore their dramatic necessity as tropes but also their resistance to the “dramatic,” as in thrown speech. I also refrain from using the term “intersubjectivity” because I believe that this term, as Burt employs it, should be fully interrogated for its relation to Jurgen Habermas’s idea of the same name, which represents substituting for “the paradigm of the knowledge of objects…the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action” (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. Frederick Lawrence, MIT Press, 1987, 295-96). The application of Habermas’s theory of intersubjectivity to Jarrell’s poetry may prove productive in another study, but I am wary of dealing with it here because of its tendency to evoke the myth of free subjects. The presence of dialogue and intersubjective understanding, after all, does not prevent against one participant assuming dominance for various institutional or ideological reasons. It also might not be the idea best equipped to handle the overbearing demand of the ethical and the interruption of autonomous action that it provokes.


EXCURSIVE POEMS, PICTURES, AND TAPESTRIES:


Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop,‖ Costello remarks that “for Bishop, questions are assertions, however open that is the primary trope of her study. In an earlier essay, “The Impersonal and the Interrogative in the notion that I also find upheld by Bishop’s work. It is not “masterment of it all while maintaining the fundamental illusiveness of mastery, a product of her rhetorical strategies. It should also soon become apparent that my reading of Bishop is potentially crushing, potentially illuminating” (135). Staging these calls in a way without knowing the answer, being able to understand the self as strange, and communication with it as another, in readiness for the od
the Waiting Room’ [and similar poems] take[ ] is the risk of engaging in real dialogue with the self as with
instance, in Modern Poetry after Modernism (Oxford UP, 1997), that Bishop cared more about social problems than her dismissal of “the complete domain of what she thought of as political poetry” would allow (37); Zachariah Pickard’s argument, in “The Morality of Aesthetic Action,” that “the modernist retreat into aestheticism” exemplified by Bishop “is [not] a dereliction of duty,” but a complex revision of what “constitute[s] moral action” in poetry (393, 395); and Camille Roman’s well-considered attempt in Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II-Cold War View (Palgrave, 2001) to read Bishop’s frequent omissions and indications regarding the political as a means of deconstructing Cold War narratives of national, racial, and sexual belonging and of disrupting the processes of cultural surveillance. Of course, Brett C. Millier’s influential biography, Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It (U of California P, 1993), with its emphasis not on the poet’s achievements but on a life plagued with the hardships of recurrent losses and the lack of a sense of belonging, fits comfortably within this critical context as well.

The entire list of scholars committed to this project would perhaps be too long to include. It
would have to begin with Adrienne Rich, who complained in Blood, Bread, and Poetry (Norton, 1986) that
Bishop’s work was so subsumed by its aura of (constrained and male-certified) triumph and perfection as to be rendered “less, rather than more, available” as a feminist example of a poetry that “struggles for self-definition and [a] sense of difference” (124-25). Many works over the next few years begin from the point of Rich’s objection and attempt to redress this critical legacy. See, for example, Robert Dale Parker’s The Unbeliever (U of Illinois P, 1988), which opens in direct opposition to the “Miss Bishop” critical industry and seeks in the poetry not triumph or perfection, but “a larger anxiety in contemporary American poetry in general: an unbelief in the self” (ix); Bonnie Costello’s Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery (Harvard UP, 1991), which discovers in Bishop’s poetry not a self-enclosed aesthetic triumph, so much as mastery chastened by “human contingency” and “unmasterable flux and plurality” (238-39); and Susan McCabe’s Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss (Penn State UP, 1994), which elucidates through the poetry “a sense of the loss at the core of our attempts to fix ourselves through language” (xi-xii). Or consider more recent endeavors to reevaluate Bishop’s socio-political conscience, such as James Longenbach’s insistence, in

151 The quote is from the interview, “The Art of Poetry XXVII,” conducted by Elizabeth Spires, which is cited in Blasing’s Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry (Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 67. For a discussion of Bishop’s attitudes on gender and women’s poetry, see Millier, pp. 331-33.
152 See, for example, Victoria Harrison, Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy (Cambridge UP, 1993); Mutlu Konuk Blasing, Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry; and Camille Roman, Elizabeth Bishop’s World War II-Cold War View. Blasing, for example, suggests that “[I]n order to read Bishop as a feminist, we need to place her all the more firmly within a patriarchal tradition so as to see how her revisions of it signify politically as well as poetically” (Politics 67). But her approach falters when she makes the dubious claim that “The only way to gain a critical distance within poetic language is to play one traditional paradigm against another and bring out how both models are equally constructed and equally in collusion with larger cultural economies” (87). Blasing’s analyses do aptly describe Bishop’s revision of closed forms like the sestina, villanelle, and sonnet, and sometimes lose focus on Bishop’s ethical and political concerns.
153 The Complete Poems, 1927-1979 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), p. 94. Subsequent references occur in the text as CP.
154 In “Elizabeth Bishop’s Calling,” Heather Cass White shrewdly observes that “[t]he risk that ‘In the Waiting Room’ [and similar poems] take[ ] is the risk of engaging in real dialogue with the self as with another, in readiness for the odd answers that emerge. This kind of calling necessarily entails listening without knowing the answer, being able to understand the self as strange, and communication with it as potentially crushing, potentially illuminating” (135). Staging these calls in her poetry, I suggest, is largely a product of her rhetorical strategies. It should also soon become apparent that my reading of Bishop is greatly indebted to what I consider one of the better works on her career, Bonnie Costello’s Questions of Mastery (Harvard UP, 1991), hereafter cited in the text as Questions. Costello, of course, beautifully acknowledges Bishop’s achievement, all while maintaining the fundamental illusiveness of mastery, a notion that I also find upheld by Bishop’s work. It is not “mastery,” therefore, so much as “the question” that is the primary trope of her study. In an earlier essay, “The Impersonal and the Interrogative in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop,” Costello remarks that “for Bishop, questions are assertions [, h]owever open-
endedly [ ] they structure experience and self-awareness” (109). Questions are capable of giving us direction, if their answers are nonetheless unattainable; “they show us where we are,” and when they fail in this they nevertheless direct us to consider who we are (Impersonal 109). In this early essay, Costello speaks of the “absolutes” questions can help us to discover, but she takes a more (correctly) questioning approach in her later book.

157 In the foreword to Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art, Bloom writes, The principal poets of Elizabeth Bishop’s generation included Roethke, Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell, and, in a different mode, Olson. Whether any of these articulated an individual rhetorical stance with a skill as sure as hers may be questioned. Her way of writing was closer to that of Stevens and Marianne Moore, in the generation just beyond, than to any of her exact contemporaries. Despite the differences in scale, her best poems rival the Stevens of the shorter works, rather than the perhaps stronger Stevens of the sequences. (ix)

There is a lot here I take exception to, not the least being the grand erasure of all poets but Bishop and Stevens. I also don’t quite like the idea of an “individual” rhetorical stance taken by these poets who were quite adept at varying and modifying their rhetorical approaches depending on their audiences and goals. “Characteristic” or “distinctive” might be better options. Nevertheless, I want to underscore Bloom’s clear acknowledgement that it is really quite silly to divorce Bishop’s poetry from rhetoric, especially when it is so essential to her goals as a poet.

158 M. W. Croll, “The Baroque Style in Prose” from Studies in English Philology. Bishop quotes from this work in a letter to Donald E. Stafford, November 20, 1933. Subsequent references to One Art: Letters (FSG, 1994) will occur in the text as OA.

159 Peggy Samuels, “Verse as Deep Surface: Elizabeth Bishop’s New Poetics, 1938-39” in Twentieth Century Literature 52.3 (2006), 306. She explains that, under the influence of Stevens and Moore, “Bishop solves the problem of depth by imagining verse, nature, and mind as two-dimensional surfaces capable of opening out three-dimensionally into each other through complex relations of absorption, reflection, modulation, and resistance. The interior of the self and a deep outer world pass through to one another via a ‘skinless’ boundary, more like a sea surface than the boundary of the human body” (Verse 306). See also Samuels’ book-length study, Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art (Cornell UP, 2010).

160 Millier discusses these anxieties about the publication of North & South, 178. The disclaimer was never actually published.

161 Samuels paraphrases from two letters, written to May Swenson on February 18, 1956 and December 26, 1960. Bishop discourages the younger poet from following the trend of writing directly about paintings. The letters are located in the Washington University Libraries Department of Special Collections although, incidentally, the first of these two letters is partially reproduced in One Art (316-17). Although this particular technical advice is not included, one does read there a paragraph in which Bishop claims not to have taken inspiration from Picasso’s rooster in composing “Roosters,” contrary to many readers’ perceptions. But given the context that Samuels restores, we may wish to proceed with caution in taking the author’s word for it, and at least acknowledge a degree of protective whitewashing here. The truth is that Bishop prefers to avoid allusion and that in her traditional ekphrases she chooses unassuming, personally affective, and perhaps even fictionalized sources from which to begin her poems. Nevertheless, we should not altogether exclude the diffuse atmospheric workings of influence and should seriously consider (as does Samuels herself in her focused analytical comparison between Bishop and Klee) the affective impress that specific artists and artworks had on Bishop’s poetic composition. The relevant paragraph reproduced in One Art concludes, rather ambiguously, “I vaguely remember the Picasso (that was his Rooster Period) and sticking one onto the page [of her draft of “Roosters”?] somewhere a year or so later in N.Y.” (316).

Although Samuels’ recent efforts present some of the most far-reaching analyses available of Bishop’s productive engagement with the visual arts, she places the concept of ekphrasis outside of her inquiry, essentially delimiting it to a particular class of poem and betraying its critical rhetorical function through an unproductive descriptive shorthand; that is, in her view, “[w]ith the exception of four poems in her oeuvre, the use that Bishop made of visual art lies elsewhere, not in ekphrastic poetry that describes or takes off from a particular painting” (Samuels 16). Samuels usually structures her analysis not only on the basis of Bishop’s personal reflections on art in her letters, but also on Bishop’s familiarity with contemporary visual arts discourses, on Bishop’s influential friendships with artists, and on Bishop’s own
painterly techniques (16-18). Her admirably inclusive methodology, which uncharacteristically founders on precisely this hasty dismissal of the ekphrastic tradition with slight evidentiary support, could only be strengthened, it seems to me, by attending to the broadly-considered ekphrastic qualities of her interrogation of Bishop’s rhetorical engagement with the visual arts.

Zachariah Picard, Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description (McGill-Queen’s UP, 2009), 194. See also “The Morality of Aesthetic Action: Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, and the Politics of Poetry” in American Literature 79.2 (2007). I am a great deal sympathetic and indebted to Picard’s recent readings of Bishop’s poetry, and in particular to his astute thesis that “[a] poet’s refusal to address directly the horrors of the world around her can constitute a complex moral action” (Morality 395). By “softening” our desire to read current political ideals into modernist poetry into a more general attentiveness to the ethical, through which “aesthetic action can be read as a positive, social good, whether or not it qualifies as ‘social conscious’ writing,” Picard argues that “we can find political satisfaction in the features that attract many of us to [Bishop’s] poetry in the first place,” namely how “complexity and rhetoric are deployed…to express something worthwhile” (Morality 397, 401). He productively extends this reading into Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description, in which he seeks to clarify Bishop’s poetics as not description for description’s sake, despite the surface appearances of her infamous statement in the “Darwin Letter” that “[w]hat one seems to want in art…[is] a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration,” but “description as a way of looking at the world” (Pickard 4-5). Throughout this study, Picard stays attuned to Bishop’s rhetorical means of accommodating the realities of the world, and takes note of her carefully modulated rhetorical use of imagery through the figure of descriptio. This makes it all the more surprising that he likewise dismisses the ekphrastic tradition, by way of its modern manifestations, in his concluding chapter. Although Pickard acknowledges the breadth of the ekphrastic tradition by citing its classical roots, which we have already had occasion to consider in the work of Ruth Webb and Janice Hewlett Koelb, he resists its primary modern connotation and makes short shrift of its rhetorical involution: “In classical rhetoric, ‘ekphrasis’ simply means description, but in current use the word has come to denote a poem that engages with a work of art—most familiarly a poem about a painting. Ekphrasis, in this more modern sense (and that is how I will use it from this point onward), has been unusually safe from accusations of being ‘merely descriptive’” (192). I take partial exception to his statement that, classically, “‘ekphrasis’ simply means description.” The works of Webb and Koelb, which focus on the classically constituted descriptive aspects of ekphrasis, as well as the works of Krieger and Heffernan, which focus more on the inter-artistic aspect of ekphrasis, have shown the convoluted intellectual history of the term and how ekphrasis again and again exceeds any mere designation as description. Any thorough consideration of “description” itself would have to take into account its various forms of historical solicitation (e.g. energeia, enargeia, descriptio, ut pictura poesis, paragone, etc.). The tradition is comprised of a great deal more than two distinct historical epochs, and the persistent ideological embattlement that has distinguished it grants ekphrasis a remarkable, aporetic prominence in the poetic tradition, akin in many ways to the troubling legacy surrounding imitation which extends from Plato’s Republic and the inception of Western philosophy.

Pickard’s primary criteria for making this judgment are that ekphrasis functions as a kind of rhetorical shorthand, which “allows the poet to describe without having to bother with the minutiae of description…of actually bringing [the artwork] before the reader’s eyes;” ekphrasis “comes preinsured against insignificance” by appropriating the privilege of the usually canonized artwork, thus transferring its particular “cultural heft” to the poignancy of the poet’s own description, however sparse or vapid; and ekphrasis likewise “comes prepackaged with an interpretive strategy”—that is, a description of the work of art is always presupposed as a statement about the poet’s own aesthetic ideas (Pickard 192-93). These criteria have a degree of validity if we confines our scrutiny to a very narrow class of necessarily modern poems about paintings. But the limits of this view are further compounded by Pickard’s distinguishing example of ekphrastic practice, Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” a strategic selection which he even admits may have been a way of “cheat[ing]” (194). Pickard perceives the cheat to lie in the fact that he chose a poem that “press[es] [its] advantages so relentlessly” upon the reader by presuming its own importance; however, as should be clear from my reading of this poem in the second chapter, I would suggest the cheating lies in not extending his reading of this poem beyond an analysis of the speaker’s own surety to attend to the self-critical turn in the rhetorical figuration employed by Auden to open up his pronouncements on art and suffering to an ethical evaluation. Furthermore, this foreshortened reading is also cheating the value of ekphrasis, which in its essence as a figure that encapsulates encounter, exchange,
antipathy, dis/union, etc. between self and other calls for nothing short of a doubled-reading, one that reads the wisdom of the text and one that reads otherwise.


164 “Toward a Theory of Ekphrasis: The Female Tradition,” in Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman (eds.), *In the Frame: Women’s Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler* (U of Delaware P, 2009), 53. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the ekphrastic poem traditionally operates on a heterosexual paradigm, in which the perspectives of poet and reader are coded as male and the described object as female. Typically, this gives rise to an ambivalent attitude, or “indifference,” toward the feminized object, which is distinguished alternately by “ekphrastic hope” for union with the other and “ekphrastic fear” of succumbing to the other. For Diehl, Bishop exploits the ambivalence of this paradigm by frequently deploying gender as “a variable position” and “reencod[ing] the subject/object opposition” in ways that allow her to explore the larger implications of the relationships between self and others (47).

165 At this point, I would refer the reader back to those positions considered in earlier chapters; namely, for Mitchell and Heffernan, ekphrasis revolves around a central conflict between the arts, Leonardo da Vinci’s *paragone*. According to Mitchell, in ekphrasis “texts encounter their own semiotic ‘Others,’ those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or ‘spatial’ arts” (699). Heffernan likewise argues that “Ekphrasis is a literary mode that turns on the antagonism…between verbal and visual representation” (7). For both, rivalry and antagonism are the motivational lenses through which the anxieties expressed by the verbal text in facing its visual other must be understood. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, however, finds this “paragonal model…less satisfying…when it comes to understanding, or even recognizing, such modest, and profound, feelings as companionship or friendship, the terms in which poets often describe their ekphrastic motives” (15). Loizeaux’s approach is perhaps the most satisfying of current studies on ekphrasis in terms of soliciting the ethical, political, and communicative functions it may serve (which I, again, must reiterate is not altogether a departure from Mitchell, who consistently registers the same concerns, even though his insistence on the paragonal relation may at times obscure the demonstrative extent of his analyses), for she differentiates between “important tropes of ekphrasis” and the much more elastic and responsive “characteristic[s]” of individual poems (16). Her study productively dovetails with mine in that it “is less concerned with ekphrasis as the genre that tries to imitate the image or the still presence of the work of art and more with ekphrasis as the genre that negotiates a relation to that other [invoked in “the dynamic interplay of the perceiving, thinking, feeling poet, the work of art and the audience”]. This sense of ekphrasis returns to the act of communication inherent in its Greek roots: *ek* and *phrasein*, to speak out” (17). Given my own inflection of the etymology of this term (see chapter 2), in which I suggested that the involution of the ekphrastic impulse may seek a speaking outside of speech as an attempt to intone a rhetoric of the saying within the said, one may perhaps understand why I wish to retain the critically resistant function of the paragonal encounter. The discussion on Fry’s “The Lamplit Answer?” to follow should help clarify this further. The reader may also wish to consult, in this context, Shahar Bram’s *The Ambassadors of Death* (Sussex Academic P, 2011). Bram makes the little acknowledged distinction that for the most part ekphrasis has operated in the Western enlightenment tradition (with the probable exception of the Romantic period) within the cooperative paradigm of the “Sister Arts,” according to which the arts freely borrow from one another and serve the same culturally progressive ends. This trend persisted in the early twentieth century, he argues, in which poetry freely engaged with the visual arts to an unprecedented extent. If this trend is sometimes challenged, Bram intimates, then it is done so in the name of challenging progressive narratives of enlightenment.


167 Although Fry often repeats that his arguments about poetry are meant to be read transhistorically, I believe that this particular essay must be read with an acute eye to the historically conditioned response women may have developed in response to the masculinist tradition of ekphrasis, and less toward a definitively gendered poetics, as he sometimes suggests. In *A Defense of Poetry*, after a mere twoparagraph “digression on women’s poems on pictures,” Fry writes, “Further evidence…would show, I think, that women’s poems on pictures finally accept the necessity of the relation but strain against it more unhappily in keeping with that distaste for autonomous self-absorption which is part of what has sometimes been called the ‘feminine aesthetic’” (85). I find this presumptuous, to say the least, and not appreciative of
the reasons why many poets, including women, cultural minorities, homosexuals, and a number of others motivated by numerous concerns, may choose to resist or reject such a poetics. Obviously, given the scope of my own argument, I would place a number of poets in this category, among them canonical male poets. At times, Fry is more careful with his pronouncements and acknowledges that his reading may not rest so certainly on reified notions of gender: “This [Schnackenberg’s treatment of visual images] could be read, admittedly, as a gendered self-distancing from a male aesthetic, but I see it as disappointment with the aesthetic as such, which has both a ‘male’ and a ‘female’ component” (Lamplit 61).

In thinking through the inclusion of the antiekphrastic within the ekphrastic tradition, I am borrowing a dialectical move central to R. Clifton Spargo’s The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Johns Hopkins UP, 2004). Spargo makes the argument that the elegiac tradition draws upon its own resistance in order to preserve in the work of mourning the mourner’s ethical obligations to the dead. The anti-elegy, therefore, becomes an expression of mourning at its ethical limit. If one wishes to speak of antiekphrasis, therefore, it is essential to acknowledge this fundamentally operative turn that he locates in the elegiac tradition. One should do so with the understanding that “antiekphrasis” is posited in and bound up with the paragonal movement of ekphrasis as one of its central possibilities; that is, ekphrasis, as a reflexive and other-inflected rhetorical practice, will always reserve for itself these fundamental irreruptions of difference. For more on the modern tradition of anti-elegy, see Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (U of Chicago P, 1994).

The terminological dogmatism I infer from Fry’s oppositional categories of “ekphrasis” and “antiekphrasis” is, for me, also analogous to the readings to which readers have sometimes subjected Levinas’s concepts of “ethics.” Notably, John Caputo, in Against Ethics (Indiana UP, 1993), proposes a reconceptualization of poetic, or “a poetics of obligation,” of which I am deeply sympathetic. He asks, “Would it not be possible…to have a kind of poetics of obligation, which would turn on something otherwise than what Hegel calls beauty, and in which it would be impossible to differentiate the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious; or the beautiful and the sublime? Then it would turn out that obligation does not oblige us to renounce poetics, but to poetize differently” (Caputo 10). But that he insists on nominating his position as “against ethics” seems to me too polemical and somewhat counterproductive. Despite the fact that Caputo sees Levinas as the foremost twentieth-century Abrahamic “prophet,” understands his work to have “shock[ed] the immanence and autonomy of philosophy” (14), and discovers through his language a way to speak of the “‘ethical’…in virtue of a double writing” (19), he nevertheless turns away from speaking of “ethics,” which is irremediably “philosophy” in Caputo’s view, and toward the classical concept of “obligation.” That he would submit ethics to its own deconstruction—to its “skandalon,” that “which makes [it] blush” (5)—and at the same time insist on the delineation of these terms; that he would dismiss the “ethical” before it has been opened up to its (im)possibilities, seems to insist inappropriately on the unequivocal precisely where equivocality should reign. Incidentally, I also perceive a similar dogmatic retention of categorical opposites in Caputo’s use of the “Hellenistic” and “Hebraic” in The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida (Indiana UP, 1997), according to which he again finds grounds for dismissing “Levinas’s too assimilative attempt to cast the God of the prophets in the language of Greek philosophy, to give Greek thought the ‘last word’” (337). Here, Caputo might be remiss in acknowledging the extent to which the languages of religion and philosophy have been codeterminative as well as in rehearsing the general lessons of Levinas’s theorization of the saying within the said.

Readings of “Poem” take center stage in most of the literature I have already surveyed, including especially Costello’s Questions of Mastery, Rosenbaum’s “Elizabeth Bishop and the Miniature Museum,” and Pickard’s Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description. Harold Schweizer also takes it as his primary example in “With Sabbath Eyes: The Particular and the Claims of History in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Poem,’” Journal of Modern Literature 28.2 (2005). Notably, discussions of both “Poem” and “Large Bad Picture” are conspicuously absent from Peggy Samuels’ Deep Skin, despite the fact that they have everything to do with her focus on Bishop’s engagement with the visual arts. No doubt this is a conscious omission, given Samuels’ expressed intention of avoiding ekphrasis as an analytical category. Pickard reads “Poem” not as a statement of aesthetics…[but] as a statement of critical methodology: it will not teach us how to paint or write, but it will teach us how to look at a painting or read a poem” (195). It might also be interesting to note that, in A Defense of Poetry, Fry finds the title “aggressive” and suggests that Bishop “emphasizes the undisclosing character of the scene according to our formula [that poems crave the insignificant potential of pictures] but is manifestly unhappy in that role” (85).
by consideration of ekphrastic rhetoric I take for granted the fact that it deconstructs itself and is
provides both “its breathing
while one cannot make the other come, one can prepare for its coming” (22).

obligated to
Attridge’s view,
and now
which tries to think the idea of a democracy to come with a recovered “messianic experience of the
scenes” (185). Likewise, Critchley describes Levinas’s influence in
not enter into any present‖ in substitution, “after the death of a certain god inhabiting the world behind the
discovery of “the trace, th
trace. At the very close of
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the text as
has successfully shifted the study of ekphrasis into an unconsidered realm, and I would draw the reader’s
special attention to Bishop’s rhopographic (emphasizing mere things) aesthetics. This book, it seems to me,
painting. She considers the work of Stevens, William, and Wilbur, and in her chapter on Bishop t
takes another approach and focuses on modernist poets’ engagement with the conventions of still life
experiences particularly salient. Whether this refers to Bishop’s grandmother, which is most likely, or
through a slip of reference to Bishop’s own mother, for whose absence throughout her childhood life she
was never capable of finding an adequate replacement, remains unclear. In this sense, the collateral nature
of Bishop’s creative inheritance stands in stark contrast to the barrenness of a more likely creative origin,
hers “Mother.”

See Rosenbaum, especially the section entitled “Poems and Dollar Bills” (72-78), for a discussion
of the economy of exchange in “Poem” and other works. My reading has a different emphasis, but I am
obviously indebted to Rosenbaum’s perceptive analysis.

Costello’s recent work, presented in the brilliant volume Planets on Tables (Cornell UP, 2008),
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I cannot consider it here, but the interested reader should see Critchley’s Infinitely Demanding:
Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance (Verso, 2008) for a further explication of Critchley’s political
philosophy. Intriguingly, he adopts the Levinas-inflected term of “anarchy,” in lieu of “democracy,” for the
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For Critchley’s doubts about deconstruction’s political possibilities see The Ethics of
Deconstruction, pp. 199-200 and passim. For a repeat appraisal of Derrida’s brand of deconstructive praxis
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Levinas’s influence on Derrida is well known, especially his borrowing of the concept of the
trace. At the very close of Otherwise than Being, a later instantiation of this concept, Levinas discusses the
discovery of “the trace, the unpronounceable inscription, of what, always already past, always ‘he,’ does
not enter into any present” in substitution, “after the death of a certain god inhabiting the world behind the
scenes” (185). Likewise, Critchley describes Levinas’s influence in a similar movement in Derrida’s thought
which tries to think the idea of a democracy to come with a recovered “messianic experience of the here and
now (l’ici-maintenant) without which justice would be meaningless” (10).

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Attridge’s view, “[r]esponsibility has an active dimension; it is not merely a passive response. I am
obligated to seek out the other, to learn to hear its voice and see its face. Derrida has always stressed that,
while one cannot make the other come, one can prepare for its coming” (22).

Likewise, I have not dwelt on the logocentric longing after presence, to which desire differance
provides both “its breathing-space” and “the destiny of its non-satisfaction” (Gr 143), primarily because in
my consideration of ekphrastic rhetoric I take for granted the fact that it deconstructs itself and is

ideas of actual and notional ekphrasis in Chapter 3 along with my reading of Jarrell’s “The Knight, Death,
and The Devil.” Bishop’s choice of visual sources also corroborates her advice to May Swenson not to
write poems on existing, famous artworks (see Samuels 16).

171 Although many have written of the significance of Bishop’s collateral genealogies, I think much
remains to be said in particular on how such genealogies function as hidden or subversive attempts to
“queue” dominant heterosexual paradigms of cultural filiation and aesthetic influence. See, for example,
Camille Roman’s focus on “Bishop’s exclusiveness and desire for the sidelines” as both a culturally
enforced alienation and a method for enacting critiques of the privative cultural narratives of U.S. Cold
War society, p. 7 and passim. One should also consider the ambiguous emphasis given to the word
“Mother” in the following passage from “Poem,” which of course renders Bishop’s traumatic childhood
experiences particularly salient. Whether this refers to Bishop’s grandmother, which is most likely, or
through a slip of reference to Bishop’s own mother, for whose absence throughout her childhood life she
was never capable of finding an adequate replacement, remains unclear. In this sense, the collateral nature
of Bishop’s creative inheritance stands in stark contrast to the barrenness of a more likely creative origin,
hers “Mother.”

172 See Rosenbaum, especially the section entitled “Poems and Dollar Bills” (72-78), for a discussion
of the economy of exchange in “Poem” and other works. My reading has a different emphasis, but I am
obviously indebted to Rosenbaum’s perceptive analysis.

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181 Likewise, I have not dwelt on the logocentric longing after presence, to which desire differance
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my consideration of ekphrastic rhetoric I take for granted the fact that it deconstructs itself and is
“successful” only to the extent that it finds itself in other mouths and hands. Furthermore, I submit that the poets I am considering are critical enough of their own language to turn its unruliness to ethical ends precisely by surrendering autonomy. But perhaps here I am violating Derrida’s edict that “Blindness to the supplement [and differance] is law” (Gr 149).

182 *The Truth in Painting* (U of Chicago P, 1987), p. 19. Subsequent references will appear in the text as TP. I do not have the space here to explicate the arguments presented in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (U of Chicago P, 1993), which I find to be Derrida’s most approachable and clarifying synthesis of many of his key philosophical themes and his thoughts on the aesthetic.

183 I note, however, one exception in *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, where Brett C. Millier writes that “Bishop’s method in the poem, as in ‘The Map,’ ‘Large Bad Picture,’ and ‘Poem,’ is to move with little warning *between reality* (“Nature,” the North Atlantic, Nova Scotia) and *artistic representation* (the tapestry, the map, Uncle George’s paintings), *blending the two* to make, of course, the poems” (302, my emphasis).

184 “Lemmata” is the title appended to the first section of the first chapter proper of *The Truth in Painting*. The OED defines the term as “1) an auxiliary proposition used in the demonstration of another proposition; 2) the argument or theme of a composition prefixed as a title or introduction; the heading or theme of a comment or note on a text; 3) a glossed word or phrase.”

185 Randall Jarrell apparently appreciated the “stillness” of these lines, for he productively appropriates this imagery in “The Old and the New Masters,” an intriguing instance of Bishop’s influence that has heretofore gone unacknowledged. In his depiction of Georges de la Tour’s painting, he duplicates this very imagery, albeit through an inversion of sin into holiness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[N]o one breathes} \\
\text{As the sufferers watch the sufferer.} \\
\text{In *St. Sebastian Mourned by St. Irene*} \\
\text{The flame of one torch is the only light.} \\
\text{All the eyes except the maidservant’s (she weeps} \\
\text{And covers them with a cloth) are fixed on the shaft} \\
\text{Set in his chest like a column[.] (CP 332)}
\end{align*}
\]
