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# TANGENTS

THE JOURNAL OF THE  
MASTER OF LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM  
AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY



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Mary Ellen Foley, Kim Maxwell, Sheryl Nonnenberg,  
Mason Tobak, Bryon Williams, and Steve Zabriskie

*Poem by* Tamara Tinker

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VOLUME 4

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## PUBLISHING NOTES

This is a publication featuring the work of students and alumni of the Master of Liberal Arts Program at Stanford University.

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Detail from illustration in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice, 1499.

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The photographs used on the front and back covers and in *Exploring John Pugh’s Trompe l’oeil Mural at Stanford Shopping Center* were taken by Kevin Bruce.

## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

We are proud to present this issue of *Tangents*, the journal of the Stanford Master of Liberal Arts Program. For the fourth edition we have chosen a diverse group of works by students and alumni, including:

- ✦ An examination of Leland and Jane Stanford’s advocacy for the Kindergarten movement
- ✦ A pair of papers presenting opposing views on contemporary critical theorist Stanley Fish
- ✦ An article based on a paper presented at the 2004 Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs conference
- ✦ A chapter from a book to be published in the spring of 2006 that grew out of a 1999 MLA thesis
- ✦ A poem by a second-year student
- ✦ And essays on works by Homer, Shakespeare, James and Poe.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous and creative assistance of Margaret Kimball and John Mustain of the Stanford University Archives, and Alex Ross of the Stanford Art Library in researching the archival images used in this issue. We are also indebted to Theda Firschein for her contributions as a reviewer and proofreader, and for her encouragement and support of the editorial team in general.

Be sure to read about this issue’s contributors, judged the best of a very good field, on the last page. We hope our choices, just in time for summer, will give you hours of enjoyable reading—and that they will inspire future contributions.



# EXPLORING JOHN PUGH'S *TROMPE L'OEIL* MURAL AT STANFORD SHOPPING CENTER

by Kevin Bruce

*This article has been adapted from a portion of my book, The Monumental Murals of John Pugh, to be published by Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, in the Spring of 2006. It contains a modified introduction to the murals of John Pugh and the essay on Pugh's mural at Stanford Shopping Center entitled Rue du Chat-Qui-Pêche. My MLA thesis consisted of seven mural essays plus an introduction and short history of the trompe l'oeil mural. This mural and 25 others were added to create the book and provide a thorough examination of Pugh's remarkable career to date. The book examines how Pugh has combined the visual trickery of the trompe l'oeil format with thought-provoking narratives to create a body of engaging and distinctive murals.*

*His murals have been instrumental in revitalizing the trompe l'oeil genre into a legitimate and vital mode of artistic expression that is both aesthetically and intellectually challenging. Furthermore, his synthesis of deception and enlightenment has expanded the horizons of the trompe l'oeil mural style, creating a genre worthy of its own descriptive categorization, Narrative Illusionism.*

*Pugh has established himself as a world-renowned muralist. His work has been featured in publications worldwide including Time Magazine, Artweek, Nice-Matin, Art Business News, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and The San Francisco Examiner. Pugh has won many prestigious honors and his comprehensive award-winning website, [artofjohnpugh.com](http://artofjohnpugh.com), is a well-visited, rich resource of mural information.*

*Kevin Bruce, MLA 1999*

## INTRODUCTION

### Monumental *adj.*

1. resembling a monument; massive or imposing.
2. exceptionally great as in quantity, quality, extent or degree: a *monumental work*.
3. of historical or enduring significance.<sup>i</sup>

All three of these Webster's Dictionary definitions perfectly describe the murals of John Pugh. They are massive and imposing, exceptionally great in both conception and execution, and are most assuredly of historical and enduring significance. But what unique characteristics make Pugh's murals stand out from the commonplace? What imbues them with this sense of monumentality? A careful analysis of his work points to two significant aspects that seem to form the basis for his unqualified success as a major private and public muralist. The most obvious aspect is Pugh's mastery of the *trompe l'oeil* format and his facility in maximizing its unique ability to attract an audience. The deceptive qualities of *trompe l'oeil* always make it engaging even in its most ordinary application. Who has not been fooled, if only for a moment, by a life-like cat painted on the side of a building, or gazed on a panoramic view of the Bay of Naples through a simulated window in a neighborhood Italian restaurant? These illusions are examples of commonplace *trompe l'oeil* murals, which are usually seen as curious pieces of perceptual trickery or decorative illusionary expanses. In the main, such works serve only to amuse or provide benign ambiance, not insights or transcendent significance. And in fact, in most cases, they do not warrant a second glance.

But the *trompe l'oeil* murals of John Pugh are quite another matter. They are not merely ornamental or curiously clever. They offer a rich and rewarding viewing experience. They are thought provoking, substantial, and sometimes even philosophical or spiritual. What separates the murals of John Pugh from their inconsequential cousins is that he **combines *trompe l'oeil* techniques with narrative or conceptual elements** and thereby not only deceives the eye of the viewer but captures the imagination and engages the mind as well. Within a framework of illusionary space, he cleverly orchestrates the discovery of layers of historical, social, and mythical visual commentaries that challenge the viewer with deeper levels of meaning.

Before we examine how Pugh created his remarkable mural at Stanford Shopping Center it will be helpful to establish a vocabulary associated with the narrative *trompe l'oeil* mural as a key to understanding the directions in which Pugh has taken this art form.

A mural is simply defined as a painting on a wall (from the Latin, *mur*, wall) or ceiling. It can be decorative or narrative or both. It may tell a story or espouse a point of view. It can be both spatial and temporal. It is often large in scale and, as a narrative platform, usually designed to promote a religious, historic, political, or even commercial theme. (Billboards may be the most ubiquitous form of mural, a fact that most muralists would deny).

*Trompe l'oeil* is French for "fool the eye" and refers to works of art designed to deceive the viewer, if only momentarily, into believing that the artist's fictive representation is real. In its most narrow definition, *trompe l'oeil* has been limited to the creation of *faux* surfaces such as simulated wood or stone. This definition has been expanded to include those elements in a painting or mural that create illusionary space deceptively. It has been further expanded to encompass any work that includes *trompe l'oeil* techniques even if it contains non-illusionary levels of meaning that are more didactic or narrative than illusionary in nature. It is this liberal, inclusive definition of *trompe l'oeil* that best encompasses the scope of Pugh's works.<sup>ii</sup>

While the illusionary or *trompe l'oeil* elements are those facets of the mural that deceive the viewer into accepting the imaginary as real, the narrative elements are trickier to define. Webster's dictionary defines the word "narrative," in reference to fine arts, as "representing stories and events pictorially."<sup>iii</sup> In reference to Pugh's works, the dictionary definition should be expanded to describe *both* the "stories and concepts" that may be represented or encoded in his murals, and the pictorial elements of imagery and symbolism that contribute to them.

The question then arises, "Do Pugh murals actually tell a story?" The answer is a qualified but emphatic "Yes." Pugh himself comments on the story-telling aspects of his murals:

The story-telling ability of my murals is their very essence. All of my murals, in varying degrees, contain narrative elements that tell a story based on the quantity and quality of the imagery and symbolism, and the imagination and level of involvement of the viewer. In my most complex narrative murals, I portray, through these pictorial means, the history, culture, and even the mythology, of the mural's locale. I do not "write" a story per se, but I do provide the artistic equivalent of words: images and symbols. It is up to the viewer to decipher the meanings from his own perspective and create a story. And there are any number of stories these images may conjure up. That is why my titles are so vague. The story each viewer captures in my murals may be different. The depth of involvement of the viewer and his, or her, powers of imagination are important to how many layers of meaning are uncovered and how they are interpreted, and to the complexity of any resultant story. Some viewers may not be interested in seeking deeper meanings in my works. Others will "read" a story of depth and insight. It is my aim and hope that they do. I try to draw the viewers in with my illusionary tricks, hoping to pique their interest. In most of my murals there is a wealth of imagery that will tell a story if the viewer invests the time and energy to decipher and interpret the images I present.<sup>iv</sup>

The narrative aspects of a Pugh mural are not necessarily linear or chronological in the manner of the epic Bayeux Tapestry, nor are they simply visual moral lessons, or vignette-like pictorial interpretations, like most Victorian narrative paintings. They are more complex in both concept and execution than either of these examples. As in some of the most provocative literary stories, there are time-distorting elements in most Pugh murals. In fact, it is the juxtaposition of past and present that creates a beguiling tension in many of his murals. In the Stanford Shopping Center mural that we are going to examine closely, this is evidenced by the temporal incongruity of the architectural style of the buildings in the mural when compared to the overall style of the shopping center itself. In a Pugh mural, the narrative elements are revealed to the viewer as clues in a puzzle of discovery, and they may add up to many different "stories," depending on how they are read by the viewer and what personal significance he or she places on them. This ability to provide the viewer with the opportunity to discover layers of meaning is a component that is missing from merely decorative *trompe l'oeil* murals where pictorial pleasantness is more important than narrative or conceptual significance.

The initial deception of the viewer is of paramount importance to the intellectual success of a Pugh mural. First, Pugh utilizes the remarkable ability of *trompe l'oeil* to deceive and thereby engage the viewer. He carefully constructs elements of illusionary space by utilizing the techniques of *trompe l'oeil* designed to deceive the viewer into accepting a false reality, if only for a moment. The act of being fooled, and perhaps feeling a little foolish, gives the viewer a sense of inclusion and identification with the mural: a perceptual bonding. The viewer is a participant in the deception, not unlike the sense of linkage established when one "gets" a joke. This bond, and the idea that further deceptions await, inexorably draws the viewer, in most cases, further into the mural. However, it could be argued that to some viewers this initial act of deception, the very process of "fooling" the eye, somehow trivializes the work. Certainly some viewers will only notice the cleverness of the deception and move on without seeking any deeper layers of meaning. But Pugh mitigates the capriciousness of this "foolishness factor" by the thoughtful and provocative nature of his narrative elements, the quality of his artistic execution, the monumental size of most of his murals, and sometimes, by the use of surrogate viewers in contemplative, almost meditative poses that enjoin the actual viewer to follow the example of their demeanor and to engage the mural more seriously.

Aristotle said, "Imitation is innate in man from childhood...[and] all men delight in imitations." *Trompe l'oeil*, specifically designed to deceive the viewer into accepting an illusion as reality, may well be the ultimate form of imitation. Pugh is supremely confident on the "drawing" ability of *trompe l'oeil*:

It seems almost universal that people take delight in being visually tricked. I've never met anyone who isn't at least somewhat intrigued by the illusionary process. It's what initially draws people to my work. And from that point they are encouraged to think about the concepts that are going on inside the piece. Once captivated by the illusion the viewer is lured into crossing an artistic threshold and is seduced into exploring the concept of the piece.<sup>v</sup>

If a mural is merely a piece of decorative illusion, no matter how well executed and cleverly deceptive, the rapport established between viewer and mural (and by extension between the viewer and the artist)

ends at the moment when the viewer admits to the initial deception, chuckles, and moves on. The chance to imbue deeper meanings is lost and the work of art trivialized. While it can be argued that even the most simple decorative *trompe l'oeil* mural can be interpreted as relating some kind of story, Pugh's intentional inclusion of layered narrative elements give his murals a depth of complexity and viewer involvement that elevates them above the merely decorative and in fact makes them truly monumental.



Rue du Chat-qui-Pêche  
Acrylic on stucco, 1988, 27 x 80 feet (8.23 x 54.9 meters),  
Stanford Shopping Center, Palo Alto, California, USA

## A TOUCH OF BRIGADOON IN PARIS

Stanford Shopping Center is an upscale open-air mall owned by Stanford University and located adjacent to the campus in Palo Alto, California. The shopping center even has a concierge and is considered a tourist destination for those who consider shopping to be a way of life. It features many of the elite department stores and a wide range of smaller boutique stores. In the center of the mall is a narrow pedestrian walkway known as "Gourmet Alley" which offers a wide array of specialty food shops and cafes. The drab and uninteresting blank west wall of Gourmet Alley was considered in need of a decorative remedy and, as a result of his growing stature as a world-class muralist, Pugh was selected to enliven the walkway with a mural to make it more aesthetically pleasing.

In keeping with its location on Gourmet Alley and the theme and atmosphere of this narrow pedestrian street in the heart of the shopping center, Pugh chose a Parisian street scene as the perfect visual adjunct to the row of food shops located across from, and next to, the mural wall. His title, *Rue du Chat-qui-Pêche* (Fr. street of the cat who fishes), refers to an actual street near the left bank of the Seine which is notable as the shortest street in Paris. Pugh's mural is a pretty straightforward street scene that, as with most things that appear simple, took a lot of effort to create. The narrowness of the actual mall walkway, Gourmet Alley, required an almost impossible-to-create moving vantage point and the *trompe l'oeil* illusion of a real street façade required pulling out all the illusionary stops. This included making the depth of field extremely shallow to compensate for the fact that the vantage point anywhere along the face of the eighty-foot mural was only the width of the narrow walkway. It is a basic tenet that the depth of the illusionary space in a *trompe l'oeil* mural is directly proportional to the depth of the vantage point from where it is viewed. This is why the illusionary alley, the cat's *Rue*, abruptly turns inward, giving the viewer a truncated view and thereby keeping it as shallow as possible. In addition, real planter boxes were attached to the imaginary balconies to actually protrude into the viewer's space and thereby strengthen the overall illusion.

The architectural style of the buildings in the mural are not only of another place but of another time as well, especially when compared to the modernistic design of the shopping center. It is as though a French version of *Brigadoon* dropped this old Parisian street right into the midst of throngs of busy California shoppers. (Serendipity would suggest that one might expect Gene Kelly to appear, considering his starring role in both *Brigadoon* and *An American in Paris*.)

The Parisian buildings form one side of Gourmet Alley but the namesake street of the "cat who fishes" is a very small street that curves off from the alley. For those who speak French there is a blue and white Parisian street sign that designates this alley as the *Rue du Chat-qui-Pêche*. For those not gifted in the French tongue there are two visual clues at the entrance of the alley, a cat and a fish. They are located on the mural at the eye level of a small child and the cat has become a legend around the shopping center. Children stop and talk to him, even give him a kiss. Incidentally, this cat was instrumental in Pugh obtaining a mural commission in Taiwan. The owner of a café in Taipei was walking her dog alongside Pugh's mural in Gourmet Alley. Her dog suddenly became agitated and attacked the illusionary cat staring at him from the illusionary alley. In a feat of canine embarrassment he soon realized his mistake but not before his owner became intrigued at the ability of the mural to attract such a ferocious response from her puzzled pet. She contacted Pugh and subsequently hired him to create a mural in her café across the Pacific. All this from a scruffy cat, frozen in time, who never seems to be able to eat the fish that is so temptingly close to him.

But there is a final touch to this mural that makes the presence of a Parisian street in California even more puzzling. As in several of Pugh's previous murals, his trademark broken wall comes into play. At each end of the Parisian street is a broken edge of concrete wall. It would appear that there once was a wall between these broken edges and it was removed, for some reason or another, revealing the presence of the French street scene. Perhaps the discovery of this street from the past was considered to be so archeologically significant as to halt further destruction of the wall. But this doesn't quite explain the rolled-up canvas covers along the top of the wall that are the exact color of the stucco on the building. It would seem that, as is the case in most of his murals, Pugh has left us with more questions than answers.

We are in the midst of a puzzle whose solution is left up to our imaginations. It is obvious that when the canvas is rolled down, the French street scene disappears and Gourmet Alley once again is thrust into the present, or at least out of Paris. But then this leads to the question, "What goes on behind the canvas when it covers the Parisian street scene?" Does the street come alive? Are the residents of the street modern-day Parisians or do they come from the past? Does the cat eat his fish dinner? Was the canvas raised only once to reveal the street and never be closed again, or is it rolled down each night for privacy only to be rolled up again every morning so the street may join in the activities of the shopping center? Is it rolled up only once every one hundred years à la Brigadoon? Only the streetwise cat-who-fishes knows for certain and he ain't talking.

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Photo credits:  
John Pugh and Chuck Savadelis

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) 1247

<sup>2</sup>Miriam Milman, in *The Illusions of Reality: Trompe L'Oeil Painting* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1982, p. 103) states that: "*Trompe-l'oeil*...should achieve a total integration with its environment and so to pass unnoticed." This is at odds with the concept of the viewer and artist as collaborators in the deception. If the *trompe l'oeil* is never revealed as being a false reality then this bond is never achieved and further engagement with the work of art never takes place. Milman is closer to the mark when she describes the relation between the viewer and the image as a "relation of uncertainty...which makes the situation ambiguous and, in the end, infinitely pleasant." (Intellectually and aesthetically relevant may be a more satisfactory description of the outcome than merely "pleasant," especially in a Pugh mural).

<sup>3</sup>Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) 1278.

<sup>4</sup>John Pugh, personal interview, 24 July 1998.

<sup>5</sup>Aristotle: *Poetics* trans. Kenneth A. Telford (Chicago:Henry Regerny, 1961) 6.

<sup>6</sup>John Pugh, "Artist's Statement" Pugh Website @ www.Artofjohnpugh.com 10 Jan. 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Pugh, Website.

Ben Jonson famously observed that Shakespeare knew “small Latin and less Greek.” However scant his knowledge of the Classics, it is clear that Shakespeare at least had a thorough knowledge of Ovid and Sophocles. Much has been made of the role that Ovid’s “Pyramus and Thisbe” had in informing the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. What might have been overlooked, however, are the clear contributions made by *Antigone* towards some of its key elements.

The first lines of *Romeo and Juliet* declare to the reader that there are “two households, both alike in dignity.” We further discover the marvelously alliterative fact that “from forth the fatal loins of these two foes/A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life” (1.1.1,5). The Montagues and Capulets are the warring households in Shakespeare’s version. In *Antigone*, the warfare is within a single extended family, the House of Oedipus. Creon is the lone tyrant of Thebes. He has, upon the deaths of first Oedipus and later his

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## SOPHOCLES’S *ANTIGONE* AS INSPIRATION IN SHAKESPEARE’S *ROMEO AND JULIET*

By Aaron Cantrell

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two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, assumed rule. His nieces, Antigone and Ismene, begin the action of the play by debating the proper burial for Polynices. The circumstances by which Creon came to power are never quite revealed. Neither are the claims that the slain brothers have to the throne (or Antigone’s, for that matter) ever examined. One possible motivation for Creon in seeking Antigone’s death, however, is to complete the destruction of rival claimants. All of this parallels the power structure in *Romeo and Juliet*. We are never quite sure about the merits of each of the households’ claims against the other. They also engage in a proxy war.

In both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antigone*, the dual causes of destruction are youthful rashness and a cursed family dysfunction. In Sophocles’s work, it’s clear that the eponymous heroine was partly to blame for her own demise. Her public, fiery confrontation against Creon backed him into a corner, allowing little recourse to his stubbornness. She publicly scolds him saying, “Your moralizing repels me, every word you say...” (557). She is “[n]ot ashamed for a moment to bury [her] brother” (773). She states that none in Thebes agree with Creon (whom she calls “tyrant” and possessed of “ruthless power”). The citizens, she says, only appear to support his view about the burial out of fear. Feeling threatened and fearing mutiny, Creon feels compelled to punish Antigone. Had she massaged Creon’s ego a bit in the throne room, showed proper deference and



subjugation, she *might* have been allowed to give her brother a ceremonial burial. More to my thesis is the case of Haemon. He tells his father that he will kill himself if he carries out his planned death sentence against Antigone. “Her death,” he says, “will kill another” (842). Is this the word of a prince to his king? Rather, it’s pure impetuosity. Juliet’s suicide solution is similar to Haemon’s. She takes an unction from the Friar which she knows, if it does not bring the “two and forty hours pleasant sleep,” may bring death. When she awakes to find Romeo self-murdered, she slays herself. Haemon and Antigone die in like manner.

There are other striking parallels between Creon and Capulet. The most famous speeches of both are diatribes against the dangers of disobedience. Creon decries “Anarchy...,” and then asks rhetorically for “a greater crime in all the earth...” (752-53). He says it is the destroyer of cities and of houses. This is dramatically ironic, for Creon is

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## BOTH WORKS CONTAIN CHARACTERS WHO ATTEMPT— UNSUCCESSFULLY— TO “SPEAK THE TRUTH TO POWER.”

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the great waster of both. He has just concluded a monologue which tells Haemon to “subordinate to [Creon’s] will in every way” (714). This speech is very similar to one Capulet gives to his daughter, Juliet. The context is almost identical. Both fathers are responding to a child whose views differ from theirs about whom they should marry. Both respond to the dissent with deadly adamant stubbornness. Capulet tells his daughter that she should either relent or “...hang, beg, starve, die i’ the Streets” (3.5). In both works, this stubbornness leads directly to a child’s suicide.

Both works contain characters who attempt—unsuccessfully—to “speak the truth to power.” The prophet Tiresias has this function in *Antigone*. He repeatedly warns Creon against a too-harsh attitude concerning Polynices’s burial. His auguries reveal a coming disaster to his city. These coming calamities he lays at Creon’s feet saying—“...it is you [Creon]—your high resolve that sets this plague on Thebes” (1122-23). The Nurse attempts something identical in Shakespeare’s work. As did Tiresias, she alone attempts to reason with the proud *pater familias*, telling Capulet, “You are to blame, my lord, to [be]rate her [Juliet] so” (3.5.169). Significantly, she is the only person to withstand Capulet to his face, though in muted tones, in keeping with her function. (She is a domestic servant after all, not a prophet.) These strikingly similar scenes contribute directly to the deaths of Juliet and Haemon.

Both works end with a too-late dash to a tomb, a furtive hope to prevent the final holocaust. In a flash of *anagnorisis* (Aristotle’s word for the “moment of recognition” in a tragedy) Creon speeds to Antigone’s prison, hoping against hope to free her. “Come,” he says, “I and my better judgement have come to this...I’ll set her free myself” (1232-36). In *Romeo and Juliet*, the recognition is collective. The entire town seems to descend upon the tomb. There they find “Romeo dead and Juliet.../Warm and new kill’d” (5.3).

The final words of the Chorus in *Antigone* apply equally to both works: “Wisdom is by far the greatest joy...The mighty words of the proud are paid in full...and at long last, those blows will teach us wisdom” (1465-70). The “star-cross’d lovers” in both works lack wisdom, though they excelled in passion. Both Creon and Capulet learn in the end to be wise, though Creon’s price is a good deal higher. He seems poised to follow Oedipus into oblivion at play’s end. The offending Capulets and Montagues, by stark contrast, are

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## WISDOM IS BY FAR THE GREATEST JOY...

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shown making amends. Says Capulet, “O brother Montague, give me thy hand...” To this show of love, Montague offers to raise a statue of Juliet in pure gold. Capulet follows suit and offers a like image of Romeo which he calls, “Poor sacrifices of our enmity.” The only memorial in *Antigone* is her unadorned tomb.

*Romeo and Juliet* and its partial inspiration, *Antigone*, warn equally against the Scylla of civic or household tyranny and the Charybdes of youthful passion. Would that Thebes had a leader with Antigone’s heart and Creon’s cunning. Would that Verona had youth with Juliet’s fire and Capulet’s sense of duty. *Sophrosyne*<sup>i</sup> is bought with great price. To be a human being means to agonize towards its elusive capture, even as did Tantalus<sup>ii</sup>.

### WORKS CITED

*Sophocles. The Three Theban Plays.* New York, N.Y. Penguin Books USA. 1984.

### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Moderation, prudence

<sup>ii</sup> Tantalus was a king who for his crimes was condemned in Hades to stand in water that receded when he tried to drink, and with fruit hanging above him that receded when he reached for it.



# PITFALLS TO AVOID AT THE INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE & SCIENCE

In writing my MLA thesis, an interdisciplinary study involving physics and literature, I ran across a surprising number of literary critics who put forward arguments based on faulty logic when working at the intersection of these two fields. Having never seen such mistakes when reading criticism that made no call on science, it seemed that interdisciplinary work of this kind must be fraught with pitfalls for the unwary scholar in the humanities. In this article, a version of a presentation given to the AGLSP conference in Charlotte, North Carolina in October 2004, I outline some of the traps in which I've seen other scholars caught, a list I made while doing my research in the expectation that doing so would prevent me from falling into the same errors.

I undertook the project because it seemed to me when reading Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* that I saw the influence of ideas from the cutting-edge physics of her day. Woolf wrote extensively about her goal of showing the deeper reality of human experience.<sup>1</sup> This tempts us to look for a parallel between her work and that of scientists, which is to delve deeper into the mysteries of the physical world, but the analogy doesn't withstand scrutiny. The scientist looks for physical truth using an agreed-upon method that provides colleagues with a means to verify results by duplication. Woolf searched instead for what could be called poetic truth. Hers was a search for the words and images that would provide the reader with the most affecting impression of the deepest reality she could reach in whatever slice of human experience was under her microscope in a particular work. I decided that wasn't the direction my work should take.

By Mary Ellen Foley

Others have pursued that course, but the results so far fail to convince. One author suggests that Woolf's activities mirrored that of scientists' because she used a notebook for "observations" and "literary hypotheses"; because she planned her novels in advance, and scientists, of course, plan their experiments; and simply because her fiction was experimental, which suggests scientific experiment (Ippolito 502). By that measure, quite a lot of human activity is like science, and the comparison doesn't help us gain any ground.

If the comparison doesn't provide fresh insight, there must be some other reason for setting it in print. This stretching of analogy beyond the snapping point would seem to indicate a will to make the comparison work even at considerable cost, a wish that literature can be validly likened to science. The purpose of these sorts of comparisons may be to borrow some of the authority that today's society accords science. Writing, however, is not a science, nor does it need to be, and making tenuous comparisons between the two is not the best way to raise literature in the opinion of a science-worshipping society.

I was still left with the problem of how ideas from early twentieth-century physics found their way into Woolf's novel. To address this question, I borrowed a pattern from Joseph Blotner, who examined how aspects of the Persephone myth seem to pop up in the book (169). Blotner suggested three possibilities: Woolf chose to use elements of the myth; the elements of the myth welled up in her subconscious mind; or the appearance of mythic elements is not Woolf's doing, but is instead a projection on the part of the critic—although if that projection leads to useful critical readings, then the approach is valid.

For my purposes, the pattern required a bit of adaptation. Blotner's first and third options transfer straightforwardly: Woolf may or may not have chosen to weave ideas from the new world-view provided by relativity and quantum mechanics into her work, and seeing ideas in her work that seem to come from physics could be all in the mind of the beholder. As for Blotner's second option, it's clear that the ideas such as relativity didn't drift up from Woolf's subconscious, but they might have drifted in because such ideas were in the air at the time.

To make the case that she used physics knowingly, I would at least have to demonstrate that Woolf was aware of the new ideas and that the implications of these ideas accorded with her project as an artist. That proved to be the easy part. Far from being some ethereal creature who could hardly pick up a pen, Woolf had a lifelong interest in hard science, from collecting moths to building a platform at her country house for viewing the stars with her telescope, and including reading popular physics books for laymen. And indeed, the implications of the new science seemed to chime well with her aims as a writer.

To make that case, I looked at how ideas from relativity and quantum mechanics seemed to be woven into her work, and how the implications of these ideas enhanced her aims as she outlined them in her nonfiction. I worked through relativity by looking at the new ways of understanding of light, space and time, and through quantum mechanics via the major elements of the Copenhagen interpretation, specifically, complementarity, uncertainty, and the interpretation of the Schrödinger wave equation.

tion as a probability wave.

Even naming these concepts points up the first potential trap for the literary scholar. If I say that the book begins with a little boy who stands stiffly between his mother's knees wishing to kill his father so he can have all of his mother's attention, as *To the Lighthouse* in fact does begin, then most students of the humanities would know immediately that I'm referring to the Oedipus complex. If I talk about the collapse of the wave function, however, a much smaller proportion of the same readership would understand what I meant. It is a rare literary critic whose education required much study of science (and vice versa). Since most of us aren't used to these scientific ideas, if we're going to work in this area we'll have some homework to do. Perhaps it should go without saying that we need to understand scientific ideas in order to use them as a basis for criticism, but a surprising number of scholars have jumped into the debate without first dabbling in some elementary physics.

Einstein's theory of special relativity explains the behavior of systems that are in relative motion. Relative motion has a variety of surprising consequences which become more noticeable when the movement involves speeds near the speed of light: to an observer who judges him- or herself to be stationary, moving clocks run more slowly than stationary clocks and physical matter contracts such that moving things become smaller in the direction of motion.

Standing on a railway platform, we see a fast-moving train as having shorter carriages than one that is sitting still. We may think of the train as moving, but from the standpoint of physics, the moving passenger may think of the train as stationary and

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the scenery as moving past outside, in which case, it is the ticket office that will become smaller in the direction of motion, and the station clock that runs more slowly. The theory of special relativity explains why this isn't really paradoxical.

The basics are not difficult to understand, but you do have to understand them to find valid parallels or correspondences in literary works. A recent dissertation gave as an example of the effects of relativity that someone in California can speak to someone in New York on the phone, yet their clocks read different times (Pavlish 4). New York is not in physical motion relative to California. Our system of time zones is a convention adopted by the Victorians. The difference in clock readings in this case has nothing to do with

Einsteinian relativity. The author doesn't help by offering as a second example that it would take some time for a signal sent from earth to Arcturus to be received and for a reply to come back; that any sort of information takes time to cover distance has been known since at least the battle of Marathon. In a similar vein, another author suggested that there is Einsteinian relativity involved in the confusion arising from a letter sent by Vita Sackville-West, because the letter began

"Today we are in Damascus" while of course, by the time Woolf read the letter, that "today" was weeks ago (Blythe 29)<sup>2</sup>. If that confusion were Einsteinian, then how, before Einstein, did readers cope with any writing in the present tense?

It may seem harsh to expect literary scholars to read Einstein (though he did write about his work for the layman, and there are any number of introductions by scientists and others) but we wouldn't take seriously a piece of Freudian criticism from someone who obviously doesn't understand Freud's ideas. Yet the article about the letter from Damascus saw publication, and the dissertation was accepted.

This doesn't mean the literary critic must be an expert on physics in order to do this sort of work. Understanding the basics is within the scope of any one intellectually qualified to analyze creative writing,

and should be expected of any scholar choosing to work in this area.

Certainly anyone can understand the principle of complementarity, ordinarily discussed in terms of the character of light, which is part of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. Scientists can do one experiment to demonstrate that light is made up of particles, and another experiment to show that light is a continuous wave. Physicists struggled for some years to make sense of this until Niels Bohr finally concluded that it was undecidable: light is both wave and particle, even though these characterizations are mutually exclusive. The principle of complementarity merely says that both views are necessary in order to

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understand light. This may sound too simple to be of any consequence, but by accepting this ambiguity scientists took a big step away from their traditional position, in which they believed they could pin down everything about the universe if they only worked hard enough.

Woolf didn't write explicitly about complementarity, but she might as well have done. It's easy to find analogous ideas in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily Briscoe says there are times when "life, from being made up of little separate incidents which are lived one

by one, became curled and whole like a wave" (47). Arriving at the lighthouse, James Ramsay sees how different it looks compared to how he's always seen it from across the bay. He says: "So that was the lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other lighthouse was true too" (186).

There are other instances of what could be the invocation of complementarity in the novel, the analogy feels solid, the argument is convincing, but there's a trap here: at the time Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse*, Bohr had not yet announced his principle of complementarity to scientists, much less left enough time for the notion to filter out into the wider world. Yet scholars have argued that Woolf was influenced by scientific ideas which were not published until after the book under discussion. It is simply not valid

to say that Woolf "did react sensitively to quantum mechanics in her creation of character" or was "acutely sensitive to the new worldview" coming out of quantum mechanics, if you are investigating books published before the Solvay Conference of 1927, when the scientists involved thrashed out the implications of this new field of physics (Constein 16-17; Friedman and Donley 96). I suspect that non-scientists feel that scientific ideas describe phenomena that are timeless, therefore it doesn't matter that scientists understood them only after a particular date. Still, an author cannot be influenced by something that hasn't happened yet.

There are ways around the difficulty in the timeline in the case of complementarity. It may be that Niels Bohr only articulated the principle in 1927, but the problem of the nature of light, of whether it was a wave or a particle, was one of the hottest topics in physics for about three years before that, including the period in which Woolf wrote her novel. The fact that reality is a composite of disparate ways of looking at nature could have been influential, just from the statement of the problem, before the scientists decided on a solution.

Not only did Woolf accept that nothing is simply one thing, she indicated that what you see is determined in part by how you look, and reality is a simultaneous superposition of all the different ways of looking. She indicated as much in the narration of *To the Lighthouse*, in which the reader gets almost no information that does not come filtered through the consciousness of one of the characters. Just as light is both wave and particle, reality, too Woolf, was a composite made up of judgments from many points of view, none of which is privileged. Lily Briscoe says that to see the outline and to see the detail are different ways of gaining knowledge of a thing, and lamented that she would need fifty pairs of eyes, that is, fifty ways of seeing, to truly see Mrs. Ramsay.

Time and again in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf calls attention to the perceiver and gaze, often figuring a look as a ray or beam of light from the eyes. We know

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LAWRENCE DURRELL

nothing about physical appearance most of the time, but she emphasizes eyes: Mr. Carmichael has yellow cat's eyes, and Lily Briscoe's different way of seeing the world is indicated by frequent references to her Chinese eyes.

All of this dovetails nicely with the theory of complementarity, but there's another trap in this area. Several scholars have made the case for influence from quantum mechanics on Woolf's later works, especially *The Waves*, which was indeed written after quantum mechanics was known not only to physicists, but to the public. However, a case built on techniques and emphases from later works, when those techniques and emphases also appear in works written much earlier, is incomplete.

Those who argue that we can see the influence of quantum mechanics in *The Waves* because of the "abstract imagery, the pluralistic points of view, the lack of linear plot, the lack of well-defined characters, the plurally related figures and events, the juxtaposition of antithetical elements" and so forth, fail to make their case, since we can find equal weight given to these elements in Woolf's work before 1927 (Friedman and Donley 96). These are scholars with well-deserved reputations for high-quality work. I don't contest their findings; to use just one example, *The Waves* is indeed built on plurally related figures and events. But so is *Jacob's Room* (published 1922), so much so that it has been called an effort to connect everyone in the universe to everyone else (Hansen 105). This provides an unanswered counterargument to the suggestion that Woolf's later work shows the influence of quantum mechanics.

Most appeals to quantum mechanics refer not to complementarity, but to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which seems to be misconstrued by literary scholars more than any other scientific idea. Heisenberg found mathematically that there exist pairs of data that obey a law such that the more precisely we know the value of one, the less precisely we can know the value of the other. The most common pair is position and momentum: if we know exactly where a particle

is, we can't know how fast it's moving; if we know its speed exactly, we don't know where it is. In the case of uncertainty, we don't have an easy workaround as we did with complementarity; the problem was not of long standing, Heisenberg wasn't looking for this result, and was startled when he found it.

The translation of Heisenberg's chosen term, *Ungenauigkeit*, as *uncertainty* does not help understanding here. *Indeterminacy* or *imprecision* would be valid translations without the connotation of *doubt* that allows the term to so easily be appropriated erroneously into extra-scientific fields. One critic writes of a "mysterious Heisenberg principle of literary language," although Heisenberg said nothing about literature and little about language, and the literary language under discussion is not being scrutinized for inaccuracy, much less for any pairs of linked literary groupings (qtd. in Pavlish xvi). In a typical claim, we're told that "[a]s Heisenberg says, in any 'observation' of any 'object' (including but not limited to the literary text—or any text, for that matter) there will always be the 'interference' of the observer (Pavlish 131). Unfortunately for that critic, Heisenberg said no such thing. Elsewhere, the same author tells us that Heisenberg's uncertainty results in a "more open" and therefore "female style of writing," and that Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* is schizophrenic because he cannot deal with the sorts of uncertainty that Heisenberg was talking about (Pavlish xxi, xvi).<sup>3</sup>

This is the final pitfall on my list, though I'm not certain how to characterize it. It could be simple misapplication of the science, or it could be the result of the critics' exploitation of the gap between the precise way in which scientists use a word and the everyday sense of the word as it's ordinarily used.

Poet and novelists brings a variety of overtones into their work by choosing words which, while not at all vague, nevertheless carry more than one sense, while the scientist's purpose is to convey one meaning precisely. Equations such as  $E = mc^2$  aren't simply shorthand; these symbols are part of an extremely precise language. But when it comes to interpreting such equations, scientists have to fall back on the only language available, the everyday language we all use, with its inherent ambiguity.

Even so, physicists use terms such as *uncertainty* in a specialized sense. Exploiting the gap between the scientists' use of the term and its extra-scientific meaning results in nonsense. Just because particles live by Heisenberg's principle doesn't mean that

words, authors, or readers must do so as well. To use these terms outside the world of physics but still respect their origins in scientific thought, their integrity as scientific concepts, and in fact to allow our comparisons to literature to have any meaning, we must avoid such injudicious broadening of scientific ideas to take in the whole world of human experience. We must concede that we are drawing an analogy to the scientific concept or making use of the interpretation of the scientific result in our work, rather than imply that the scientists' findings somehow have jurisdiction over art, or even over all human endeavor.

That brings us to the end of the list of traps to be avoided, but leaves open the question of how scientific ideas came to appear in Woolf's fiction. I can demonstrate that Woolf knew about these ideas and that they accorded with her artistic project, but in the end I cannot prove that she chose, consciously or unconsciously, to use them for her own ends. The bar is set high when the question is one of influence.

I am left with Blotner's third possibility: that I find ideas from physics in the novel because I see the work through a physics-colored filter. This is no different, however, from looking at the text through the filter of Freudian psychology, Bergsonian philosophy, feminism, or any other system of ideas. Using scientific ideas as the lens through which to examine the text led me to explore Woolf's technique—from the overall structure of the work, to point of view, to symbolism—and themes—from elegy to epistemology. Clearly, the approach has its uses.

As a reader new to Modernism when I undertook this study, approaching the novel via physics opened up Woolf's work to me, and led me to a better understanding of Modernism than I'd managed to get from traditional approaches. I would not nominate Einstein's physics as the lens through which to view all literature, but only suggest that examining literature alongside the compelling scientific ideas of the time of its composition may be illuminating.

There are however, pitfalls for the unwary. The critic must take the time to understand the science in the first place, and give consideration to why the juxtaposition of that science with the prose is valid; allying the literary with the scientific in order to borrow some of the authority currently granted science is not reason enough. If arguing for influence from science, the critic must understand when scientific discoveries took place in relation to the creation of the literary work, and when the new scientific ideas would have

been available to the lay public. Any assertion of influence of science must take into account the author's earlier career, as a persuasive argument for influence in later work can be undermined by similar "evidence" of influence in works written prior to knowledge of the pertinent science. Finally, the critic must take care not to stretch analogy to the breaking point, nor take the scientific ideas out of context to the extent that they become meaningless.

These boundaries allow an ample field of play, in which consideration of literature alongside contemporary science can be illuminating and satisfying. Lawrence Durrell, who claimed he based his *Alexandria Quartet* on the four dimensions of space-time, said: "We get a wider view of [art] if we don't rope it off from everything else and ... consider it as an isolated phenomenon. There are ... many kinds of truth, some of which have little enough to do with reason as we understand it. Yet all methods of approaching truth are legitimate. They are when all is said and done only ladders, some long, some short. ... Mathematics, biology, painting and poetry are different ways of looking at reality and trying to construct ... satisfying pictures of it. The important thing about all these pictures is not their relative truth, but the joy they can communicate. And our feeling for literature can only gain from an appreciation of the fact."

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is clear from her fiction itself, in the ways in which *To the Lighthouse* differs from the work of those authors she designated "materialists," though she also wrote of this explicitly in her essays and memoirs. In "Modern Fiction," for example, she claimed it is the duty of a modern novelist to express this deeper reality in words. Her argument with the materialists was that they expressed only outer appearances, constructing beautiful but lifeless exteriors, writing of "unimportant things." They spent immense effort on "the trivial and the transitory," while Woolf sought "life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing." See Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1938) 145-153.

<sup>2</sup>Blythe took his cue from Sackville-West herself, who wrote on another occasion from Teheran that "everything is so confused, so Einsteinian." See Vita Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo & Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 189 (9 February 1927). Sackville-West may have anticipated the delay, or merely have felt a general disorientation as a result of long weeks of travelling; the latter is more likely because she doesn't mention anything about any time difference or time lag. Woolf was correct in questioning the attribution when she wrote to Ethel Smyth from Greece, foreseeing the delay in Smyth's receiving the letter, but asking "Whats Einstein got to do with it?" [sic] See Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, Vol. 5 (London: Hogarth, 1985), 58 (4 May 1932).

<sup>3</sup>The comment on Septimus Warren Smith is not made explicitly. Pavlish says that Woolf creates two kinds of characters, those who can and those who can't deal with uncertainty. Artists manage to assemble a coherent reality out of uncertain fragments; those who can't perform this feat become schizophrenic. Elsewhere in her dissertation she identifies Septimus Warren Smith as the latter.



# THE WALL

## AN ESSAY ON POE'S CASK OF AMONTILLADO

By Kim Maxwell

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO  
TURNS AROUND A SINGLE REPEATED  
IMAGE, OF DESCENDING WITHIN A  
DARK AND MOIST ENCLOSURE.

Perhaps no story of Edgar Allan Poe's fulfills his own calculus for a single poetic effect as well as *The Cask of Amontillado*, a brief, single-minded excursion into an act of calculated revenge. Yet one is left at its conclusion with questions about what this effect might be. A certain sense of poetic horror no doubt trails after the final words, along with a recognition that this poetic horror has been beautifully realized, but the story asks us in several ways to compile its words into a meaning beyond its collected sentences. The story lacks a sense of time or general place, Montresor gives no explicit motive for his revenge, and the ending leaves the question of Montresor's inner guilt unanswered; it is as if we are to supply the missing pieces. The story clearly puns on "mason" as the trowel and the quasi-religious fraternal order, which along with the allusive description of Montresor's coat of arms, a number of other biblical references, and the inescapable image of ritualized interment pushes us to consider religious and political themes. Yet these and other pointers have not led to a critical consensus about what the story means. Indeed, the variety of views published over its 160-year life suggests that the story itself cannot determine its own meaning. The story virtually insists that the reader adopt a point of view that contributes some context and structuring outside the story itself for the story to assemble in the mind. Different points of view determine different stories.

I wish herein to adopt a point of view that has not attracted critical attention yet, namely, the subject of language. The story justifies such a point of view by convolution of two features, its dominant allegory of mind and its relative density of dialogue inside its principle source for this allegory, the crypt itself. Poe's other psychological tales exhibit little dialogue; several of the best known — *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* — have none in the sense of exchange. This story is not only brimming with dialogue, its dialogue collapses into nonsense by the story's end. In a sense the story compounds two allegories, one of the mind, the other of language, suggesting the two relate in some important ways.

*The Cask of Amontillado* turns around a single repeated image, of descending within a dark and moist enclosure. It begins with the title. In wine circles, a "cask" is an empty barrel ready to receive wine. The word is cognate with the Spanish word "casco," meaning skull or helmet. Amontillado, a refined Spanish sherry, is made by dripping wine as it ages into a system of successively lower but interconnected casks, with new vintages added at the top. The title thus evokes an image of wet enclosure, an allusion to vacant psychological space, and a sense of downward movement. Poe reinforces all three elements by vivid descriptions of the cave as a dark, wet, descending enclosure.

When spoken slowly, the word "Amontillado" reflects a sense of descent, of downfall. Poe repeats the word obsessively. Indeed, one can almost hear Fortunato's final pitiful cry in the early exchange:

"Amontillado!"  
"I have my doubts."  
"Amontillado!"  
"And I must satisfy them."  
"Amontillado!"

Taken as a little piece of poetry, these lines interfuse intentions, persons, and a falling fluid, the combination of which serves as a frame that paradoxically locks the words together and intimates their dissolution.

Consistent with the idea of enclosure, the story creates its own universe, a sense taking root in the first paragraph. Rather than begin *in medias res*, Poe drops us into the denouement, eliding the beginning and middle in favor of a single, illusive line that tells us only of Fortunato's transgression, not its nature or circumstances. He fails to establish time, place, or setting. The opening sentence establishes a first-person point of view, with an intimation of

unreliability. But the second sentence jars our perspective. Rather than push narrative distance back through realized unreliability, Poe introduces an interlocutor, a “you” that never repeats but never quite leaves the story. It matters not who “you” might be; but it matters greatly that “you” exists, as a potential agent of dialogue. The next three lines establish the dimensions of the story’s space as a universe. Montresor cries, “I would be avenged,” a phrase worthy of a motto, and repeated later as such. But then he says, “this was a point definitely settled.” By whom? The passive voice, unique to this sentence in the story, reaches for the unspoken moral authority, who is decidedly not Montresor. We might even think that Montresor consulted an oracle or a priest for guidance. Not satisfied, Poe next offers a credo of vengeance, a moral code so awkwardly written that we must stop and notice it. But this is a world without detail, without particularity, without time or space, without motion, replete with generalizations and awkward language and ambiguous points of view. It has suffered kenosis, an emptying out that creates a kind of universal cask, a container ready to receive its wine.

Two paragraphs later, everything changes. Ambiguity gives way to the concrete. Absence of physical detail and sensations transforms into exquisite fine structure and palpable wet walls, bones, jingling bells, shouts, Medoc, flickering light, cold. Timelessness becomes the hours between dusk and midnight. An indefinite space gives way to a very tangible cave ending in a crypt. A nameless iniquity produces a man alive, chained against a dark seeping wall and sealed up, stone by stone, until the last light flickers out. Montresor acquires a name, a family, clothing, a sense of humor, guile, and low-grade trepidation during the coup-de-grace. And two men talk as they descend into this dreadful night. Montresor’s crypt is the real world, for the story, and the entire world, a world with order, rules, life, death, and language.

It is not automatic that this world stands for the mind. Indeed, it could be taken as the world, an abstraction for the universe at large, whose neutrality or indifference informs the moral valence of the story. The images of hollowness, wetness, and fecundity could be taken as an allegory of the womb, the maternal in nature, from which ideas of the pain of creation or the primitive impulses of sex and violence might emerge. The various religious allusions combined with vaults, bones, and crypts could justify a church, a sacred site in which one contemplated the nature of rituals, worship, revelation, and salvation. But an allegory of mind reflects a good deal of the detail, can combine all three of these other options in a way, and makes the most sense of the ending. The mind is a creative enclosure that seems to the owner to represent the universe as a work of art, which carries moral judgments often in conflict with its own indifference to aspects of the received world, and which serves as the site of salvation. It is the site of the soul, intentions, and understanding, all of which acquire numerous direct and indirect references in the story. And the end, the dividing of the mind, seems to be a more gratifying image than a world, a womb, or temple divided by similar means.

Poe develops inside this allegory a descending conversation. It has three discernable segments: the seemingly casual chat down the crypt; the exchange of screams following Fortunato’s revival from his stupor; and the final war of puns during which the two either melt together or exchange places in some way. The first part, enormously rich in its range and detail, flashes much of life before our ears. We hear about class systems, health, wealth, nature, fraternal orders, wine, architecture, burial rituals, happiness, alienation, cultural conventions, clothing, the interactive chemistry of flame and air, vanity, drunkenness, and toasts. We also see a parade of symbols: Montresor’s mask, the crypt, the jingling bells, the Masonic toss of the bottle, the corresponding trowel, called a “sign,” the white web-work, the toast to the dead, the toast to the living soon to be dead, and, perhaps most importantly, the coat of arms and its motto. Yet the story leaves these symbols curiously uninterpreted. Symbols are notoriously susceptible to ambiguity without a scorecard. What does the coat of arms mean? It surely does not display revenge—the snake has the man’s heel as the heel crushes the snake. If this is taken as a representation of *Genesis* 3:14-15 (a common view), both the snake and the heel are doomed. The motto itself (Latin meaning “no one provokes me with impunity”) has been

taken as a rewriting of *Romans* 12:19, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord.” But this only makes sense if Montresor is taken as God, an implausible reading if the text serves as context for the motto. Indeed, the motto seems to justify Montresor’s actions as long as he can provoke in turn with impunity, but it conflicts with the coat of arms, itself in conflict, and it conflicts with its putative gesture to the Bible. Either Poe intends nothing here beyond narrative painting, or he intends to illustrate the inherent muddle of conventional symbols presented as such, that is, presented without an explicit set of explanatory descriptions.

In this sense the first segment of dialogue creates a kind of poetic universe, built on some conventional presumptions about how rhetorical language works: it names; it describes states of affairs; it interrogates; it orders; it creates atmosphere and context; it expresses beliefs, and it instills beliefs known to have false objects through verbal manipulation; it expresses irony, metaphor, and others figures to create emotional effect; its sound alone can mimic and thus convey information about states of affairs such as a cough; it embodies ambiguities of meaning and reference that give rise to confusions that produce poetic effects (the reader can disambiguate them successfully). Stripped of its frame and known purpose, it would seem to be a relatively normal, even humorous interchange between two people in a wine cellar, one of whom was really drunk, ill, and somewhat dense of mind. But of course it cannot be stripped of its frame and purpose. Some of its more obvious ironies depend upon the frame, and some of its other poetic features only rise to a state of recognition in relation to the frame. One of these is the proleptic utterance of word echoes. It begins with “Amontillado” before they enter the crypt, but it becomes very noticeable thereafter, with “nitre,” “drink,” and “mason,” the last a quite funny pun out of context. Fortunato echoes himself with the word “nothing” on three occasions, and Montresor joins with repetitions of “true” and “yes.” With these obvious examples in hand, other echoes can be seen, such as the exchange of toasts, Fortunato to the dead around him, Montresor to Fortunato’s long life. We are being prepared for what happens next.

High melodrama happens next. The pair discover a crypt whose depth cannot be seen with the feeble light (another symbol of sorts). They exchange supposed recognitions of Amontillado, another echo. But Montresor has no trouble chaining Fortunato to a wall of bones, finding fresh mortar and bricks, and beginning the step-by-step construction of a new wall. This wall not only seals Fortunato into his grave, it complicates the allegory of mind. As it goes up, as it separates the two except for their heads, Fortunato emits a terrifying scream. Explicably, Montresor recoils, hesitates, trembles, takes out his rapier to feel around inside the crypt, but relaxes when he discovers that Fortunato has not come loose, supporting himself on the wall of the crypt. Inexplicably, Montresor replies in kind, “re-echoed,” “surpassed them in volume and in strength” until Fortunato is silenced.

The story tells us no more directly about what to make of these screams. But it does offer some hints. The narrator calls Fortunato the “clamorer,” as if he had been reduced to the scream itself. By implication, Montresor has also been reduced to his own screaming, a kind of primal power that overcomes all, that appears in the repeated first person pronouns: “I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed.” As such, these screams have meaning—inchoate, inarticulate, but definite in its way. We could attempt to formulate some redescriptions of them to make them articulate, but word-based expression could not operate as synonyms, that is, replacements for the screams themselves, without losing most of their effect, which effect in this case is their meaning. Now this is a considerable addition to the idea of language adumbrated in the few paragraphs before. First, we can name things (a “scream”) that have meaning but which cannot be expressed or characterized fully otherwise. Second, such meanings reside in the mind alone; they are not public in the ordinary sense. Third, these meanings have arisen at the border between life and death, a conventional moment of philosophical or spiritual illumination. Taken together, these points suggest that language is not easily bounded by what can be expressed inside its formal structures of words, syntax, and semantics, that real meanings obtain which cannot be commu-

nicated, and the boundary itself between mind and the outside world is not as distinct as our vocabulary of subject/object tends to make it.

The final exchange between the two manifests this last point. A small hole in the wall remains. Fortunato laughs hysterically, but actually makes some sense. He calls the illusive cask "our wine," which Montresor then names, echoing the numerous callings by Fortunato of the same name. The two then seem to come together:

"...Let us be gone."

"Yes," I said, "let us be gone."

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"

At a primitive level, these lines just play out some puns on "gone" and "love of God," meant in different ways by the different speakers that honors the inherent ambiguities of language. But in context of what has happened before, these lines intimate a commingling of the two men themselves at some level, spiritual or mental or psychological. God's love in theory admits no discernment, and the story itself refuses explicit judgment of either man; they seem to have melted together.

But two things interfere with a full assimilation of one into the other. One is the wall itself. The story insists that this exchange be imagined through a hole the size of a brick, a hole that is soon filled. Such physical separation must be followed with allegorical separation if it is to have any meaning at all. What the separation produces, of course, is silence, a point I will take up shortly. The second factor is that of echo itself. The story hangs nothing on mythological allusions, but the word "echo," the repeated echoes that produce in the end complete separation and death, and the loneliness of Montresor facing a world largely of his own making, all correspond to the Ovidian version of Echo and Narcissus. Echo cannot win Narcissus because she is cursed to only repeat what is said to her; her bones turn to stone, her only legacy the power of echo itself. Narcissus falls in love with his own appearance and dies accordingly, leaving only a flower in his wake. The two seem to meet in hell, but cannot shake their worldly proclivities, Echo rebounding "to every sorrowful noise of theirs with like lamenting sound" and Narcissus "tooting on his shadow still as fondly as before" (Golding translation, third book). These are expressions of permanent separation, with permanent dysfunction, a dysfunction borne on the absence of communicative language.

That meaning has died is not a necessary outcome of this story, but it is strongly suggested by the silence at the end. As soon as Montresor completes the wall, the story gives us fifty years in a single line and a spiritual conclusion, rest in peace. On the one hand, these two linguistic events require that we suspend judgment on the proceedings narrated, for the story has done so. On the other hand, these lines can be seen as the final direction to the reader, that he or she must decide, not the story. The moral decision is easy, trivial, not worth writing down. Therefore, the story begs us to seek other ground. I have suggested in the analysis above that the story justifies language as a suitable ground. What now may we say about it?

One thing for certain is that language requires two people, a community of speakers; as soon as that community disappears, language disappears. While this may itself seem trivial, it does imply that language is not innate, a part of nature, given to us with our DNA or supplied by God, or a product of inborn generative operations of mind. On the other hand, language is not reducible to convention, a product of culture alone. Words imitating what they mean and sounds with no ordinary meaning that still convey meaning suggest a native capacity to produce meaning independent of prior convention. On this account, language must combine features of the natural capacity of the mind with how those capacities play out in social circumstances rather than rely upon one or the other alone. Plato came to this conclusion in his dialogue *Cratylus*, but we see linguistic studies today proceeding along these two independent lines, the Chomsky-led drive for language derived from built-in mental functions and the more

anthropological drive by people like Geertz and Lakoff who imagine language in purely cultural terms.

A second strong implication is that language not only serves many more purposes than describing the world and dividing its descriptions between the true and the false; it also muddies the distinction between the true and the false. Can we really tell what is going on in the cave? Consider Fortunato's belief about the cask of Amontillado. The story intimates that no such cask exists, that he had a false belief, but the cask may in fact exist exactly where Montresor points, in that limitless crypt whose end no light can illuminate. The story does not depend upon the cask's imaginary status; yet we find ourselves inevitably believing that it does not exist. This is a trick of the mind, the same trick we believe Fortunato succumbed to. Such tricks play havoc with our discernment of reality. The entire story actually depends upon such a trick.

A third philosophical puzzle emerges at the end. The two characters seem to lose their identity when they lose their ability to communicate. This raises the general question of how we relate to language. Do we exist as individuals before we can express ourselves, or because we can express ourselves? If the former, how do we understand ourselves as individuals without the benefit of language, often thought to be essential to how we understand anything? If the latter, are we the same as our expressions (a common view in many circles today, even if only by implication) or somehow separate from our expressions (and if so, in what lies the difference)? The former reduces to behaviorism with all of its problems; the latter circles back to the first option.

The story would be asked to do more than it does, or probably can as a work of fiction, to propound answers to the questions it raises. But it does place some constraints on what can develop from such theories. For example, the story makes it very difficult to isolate language and mind into black boxes that can be understood and studied independently. Minds in particular would seem on the story's account to be quite porous, more dependent upon their environment, including the minds of others, than many theories of the mind would like to permit. This would include all of the theories of mind that compare it to a computer, as a functional system with a processor and memory that takes in perceptions and produces behavior. This would also include any theory of mind that depended, overtly or covertly, on a sharp distinction between subject and object, or the mind as a separate entity. On examination, most modern theories of mind rely upon such distinctions, even those based on behavior or computational models. The story also obstructs views of mind (such as that of Lacan) that reduce mind to the operations of language, as well as views of mind that subsume all within its orbit (Hegel comes to mind). Yet this story seems quite real in this sense, that as we imagine it, reconstruct it in our own minds, the way in which these two men related makes some odd if demonic sense. We would do worse than ask of theories of language and mind to account somehow for how this story works.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay requires either that the reader have a very good memory of this story, or that the story is both recently read and in front of the reader. If the reader does not have a copy, one may be found at <http://www.literature.org/authors/poe-edgar-allan/amontillado.html> or other sites reached through Google.

# AN UNBROKEN LADDER: JANE AND LELAND STANFORD'S ADVOCACY FOR THE KINDERGARTEN MOVEMENT

By Sheryl Nonnenberg

*We have decided to start this institution with the college course of study beginning with the freshman year. In time we hope to extend its scope from the kindergarten through the high school to the university course...* Leland Stanford, October 1, 1891 (Opening Day Speech)

The founding of Stanford University was the culmination of Jane and Leland Stanford's dream of memorializing their only child and providing an educational institution for their "adopted" children of California. But the University itself was only part of a larger vision. As is indicated in Leland Stanford's opening day speech, the Stanfords had originally hoped to provide an educational setting that would encompass early childhood curriculum and proceed all the way to the university. Leland's death in 1893 and the subsequent financial difficulties that beset the university precluded these ambitious goals.

Both Jane and Leland Stanford were proponents of the kindergarten movement that swept the United States in the 1870s/80s and, although they were not able to provide the kindergarten experience at their newly founded university, their financial support and advocacy for the kindergarten movement played a crucial role in the establishment of this social/educational reform movement in San Francisco. To understand how this movement, with its emphasis on very young children, would appeal to the Stanfords' philanthropy and sense of social obligation, and to appreciate their largely forgotten role in it, it is useful to look at the history of the kindergarten movement.

Kindergarten (literally "child gardening") was the invention of a German educator, Friedrich Froebel, in the mid-1830s. Froebel's theories about early child-

hood education were largely shaped by his own experience as a child in Weimar, Germany. Froebel's father was a strict Lutheran minister who paid little attention to his son. His mother died when he was a baby, and although his father quickly remarried, Froebel never enjoyed a close relationship with his stepmother. This lack of maternal care and affection had an enormous impact on Froebel's kindergarten philosophies, which extol the virtues of women as spiritual leaders of men. A secondary influence on Froebel's philosophies was his love of nature. As a child, he spent many hours alone in the wooded countryside near his home. He developed an interest in botany, which eventually led him to serve as an apprentice to a woodsman in the Thuringer forest. Although he abandoned a career in forestry in order to become an educator, his observations on the harmony and interconnectedness of all things in nature had a profound impact on his kindergarten ideals. For Froebel, forced lessons on duty, morality and religion were useless; all of these concepts were best learned by observing nature. Physical play, out of doors, was a key element in the successful kindergarten; it provided a source of original experiences and a way to understand the outside world. This attention to the physical and emotional needs of a child were unheard of prior to Froebel. Similarly, his theory that learning should be fun and that play was a crucial part of a child's education were revolutionary at the time.



Until the mid-nineteenth century, there were no schools for children under seven. Children were perceived as small, ignorant adults whose behavior must be shaped by their elders. Although the Puritanical views of children as inherently evil were slowly waning, formal education practices still reflected the belief that sternness, fear and intimidation were necessary elements in the successful training of children. With the advent of child labor laws, the call for universal education and education reform, the attitudes towards the training of young children began to change. What if they were not just "blank slates," what if there was indeed an opportunity to develop natural talents and abilities before age seven? How could such children be groomed to be the new citizens of the republic? The new emphasis on patriotism and preparing children to take their place in society, in addition to the democratic ideal that everyone should have equal access to education, made the United States ripe for the philosophy and theories of Friedrich Froebel. He wrote, "The United States is best fitted by virtue of its spirit of freedom, true Christianity and pure family life, to receive my education message."<sup>1</sup>

Froebel's kindergarten methods were translated, interpreted and disseminated in every part of the United States, even after his death in 1852. Scores of Froebel-trained teachers (like Susan Blow and Kate Wiggin) taught aspiring young women, who found

that teaching was a socially-acceptable profession, to embrace the theories and philosophy of child gardening. The first kindergarten in the United States was started in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856. By 1885, there were 565 kindergartens, with 1400 teachers and 29,716 students in the United States.<sup>2</sup> By the 1890's, kindergarten had become part of the public school system. Clearly, Froebel's belief that the early years of a child's life had a profound influence on later development was accepted, and adhered to, by the American educational system. Froebel's method of teaching centered around "gifts," his term for the tools he developed to teach the moral and practical values of kindergarten.

These gifts included: balls, building blocks, parquet tiles, sticks, sewing, paper cutting and folding, peas work and modeling clay. With the aid of these gifts, children would master the world (nature), mathematics (knowledge) and art (beauty). His philosophy was predicated on three key concepts: the child learns from *doing*, the child needs to be with a society of equals and, finally, that kindergarten addresses the whole child, developing intellectual, spiritual and physical potential. Not only did such an approach prepare the child for more established educational doctrine later, but it was also a deterrent to moral evils and a life of crime. As Froebel advocate Kate Wiggin wrote in 1893, "More public kindergartens

now—fewer jails later.”<sup>3</sup> So, not only was kindergarten a revolution in education reform, but it was also a social reform movement, and one that was eagerly received in San Francisco—a city with one of the largest immigrant populations in the country.

During and following the Gold Rush, San Francisco was a city where fortunes were easily won and lost. But by the 1870s and 1880s, clearly delineated levels of society were being established. There were, of course, people of great wealth, like Jane and Leland Stanford, whose fortune was made via commerce and the transcontinental railroad. On the other end of the spectrum were the residents of the South of Market area; Irish, German and English immigrants who worked as tradesmen and craftsmen. According to Carol Roland, whose doctoral dissertation focused on the social conditions that gave rise to the kindergarten movement in San Francisco, there was a general belief that the working class needed to be guided towards a healthy work ethic and American middle-class values. Negative tendencies such as laziness, violence and alcohol abuse could be circumvented by early environmental influences, like kindergarten. As Roland explains, kindergarten was eagerly embraced by the leaders of San Francisco society because of “its emphasis on Christian ethics and morals and as a clear and systematic way to battle the evils of slum life.”<sup>4</sup> And the residents of the slums responded positively to the introduction of kindergarten into their neighborhoods; kindergarten was a means of social access and mobility and provided a good moral influence for their children. At the very least, kindergarten provided much needed care for children whose parents were both in the work force.

The kindergarten movement was, at its heart, a women’s cause. Although men were involved, mainly in an advisory capacity regarding matters of finance or politics, it was the women of society who promoted and funded the movement. Like their peers on the East Coast, wealthy women in San Francisco flocked to popular causes like social welfare and education reform. In San Francisco, the three richest, most prominent women were Jane Stanford, May Crocker and Phoebe Hearst, all of whom became patrons of kindergartens in San Francisco. In 1878, Kate Wiggin, a Froebel-trained educator, founded the first free kindergarten and the Silver Street Kindergarten Association with funding from the Crocker family. A second organization, the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association, was founded by Sarah Cooper, with the financial aid of Phoebe Hearst and Jane Stanford.

According to an 1891 article entitled “One Woman’s Work” by Helen Smith, Jane Stanford’s involvement in the kindergarten movement began with a request for \$1,000 from Sarah Cooper. Apparently, the school was in dire financial straits and the donation would enable it to stay open for another year. Shortly after the donation, Jane and Leland Jr. visited the school and had a revelation about how the “other half” lived. Smith’s rather melodramatic recounting of the incident had Jane amazed at the misery and squalor she found in the slums of San Francisco. The author writes that Jane proclaimed, “Oh, I have lived such a selfish life!” The experience was equally moving to Leland Junior, who supposedly told his mother that helping the poor kindergarten students was “the best thing you ever did in your life.” After Leland Junior’s death in 1884, Cooper suggested that Jane fund a kindergarten as a memorial to her son. Soon, there were a total of eight Stanford Free Kindergartens (the first memorial kindergartens in the world) in the Bay Area, six in San Francisco and two in “the country” (Menlo Park and Mayfield). In 1885, Jane was named honorary president of the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association.

The Stanfords’ most profound and enduring gift to the kindergarten movement was a contribution of \$100,000 to the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association. It comprised the main part of the organization’s operating budget and also included a trust fund that lasted until 1993. Thanks to the largesse of the Stanfords, the Association was the largest privately financed kindergarten system in the country. At a time when there were a plethora of social causes (from temperance leagues to the suffrage movement) begging for funding, what was it about the kindergarten movement that so inspired Jane and Leland Stanford? The answer lies in both highly personal and philosophical motivations. For Leland Stanford, kindergarten ideals were completely in accord with his own philosophy about education. Ironically, Leland Junior did not attend school with other children, but instead had a number of private tutors throughout his life. There was, however, a kindergarten teacher who had a lasting impact on the young boy. In *The Educational Ideas of Leland Stanford*, David Starr Jordan recounts a story told by Leland Stanford in which he tells of young Leland’s study with a kindergarten teacher named Miss Mary Frazer McDonald. Miss McDonald “taught the stories of nature to his son and to other children in a simple, natural way, had a great influence on his mind, as showing that real knowledge could be made as attractive as the conventional

mythology of childhood.”<sup>7</sup> Stanford was evidently so impressed with the kindergarten system of education that he applied it with “signal success” to the training of his trotting horses. Jordan goes on to explain that Leland Stanford believed strongly in an educational system that formed “...an unbroken ladder from the kindergarten to the highest university, a ladder that each one should be free to climb...”<sup>8</sup>

For Jane Stanford, the ideals of kindergarten were totally in keeping with her fervent beliefs in a spiritual, temperate lifestyle with an emphasis on service to man and God. In addition, the strong role of women in the kindergarten movement coalesced with Jane’s opinions about the importance of women achieving an education, while holding motherhood as the ideal occupation. Properly trained kindergarten teachers were, in fact, surrogate mothers; they provided care, nurture and imparted spiritual and moral lessons. Helen Smith relates that the kindergarten day began with washing up, being given a clean apron and handkerchief, and included instruction about religion, often the first exposure to God for most of the children. There is a heartwarming anecdote about a young boy who attended a Stanford Free Kindergarten and whose transformation from street urchin to prayerful school boy had such an impact on his alcoholic father that he resolved to change his ways. Jane responded to the story, saying, “That one instance has repaid me for all I have done.”<sup>9</sup> Incidents like this, and Sarah Cooper’s unofficial study revealing that there were *no* kindergarten graduates in reform schools or prisons, clearly served as reinforcement for the Stanford’s philanthropy. But there was also, no doubt, the factor of memorializing their dear son in such a visible, life-altering manner. After Leland Senior’s death, Jane’s attentions turned towards the solvency of the university and her involvement with the kindergartens dwindled.

Ironically, the fact that the kindergartens in San Francisco were privately funded proved to be a detriment in the long run. By 1895, kindergarten (a revised version of Froebel’s original idea) was integrated into the American public school system and supported by tax dollars. The kindergartens in San Francisco had not been folded into the public school system, and by the turn of the century only 13 remained in operation. After Sarah Cooper’s death in 1897, the loss of her vision and fund-raising acumen resulted in fewer donations to the GKA. Additionally, competition from other social causes that the elite could support meant fewer dollars for the kindergartens. Also, the kindergartens originally begun by Wiggin and

Cooper, with their strong emphasis on social reform, became an anachronism as the national focus turned towards educational reform, with some of Froebel’s child-centered philosophies being adopted upward into the primary grades.

Jane and Leland Stanford’s support of the kindergarten movement was yet another example, in addition to the founding of Stanford University, of their commitment to providing a meaningful educational experience for the children of California. It was also reflective of their deep concern for the emotional and spiritual health of young people who would one day govern the world. To cope with the grief caused by the loss of their son and the enormous potential that he showed as an intelligent and caring young man, the Stanfords looked to other children and how they might encourage their futures. The kindergarten movement, with its emphasis on the joy of learning, was a natural outlet for the Stanfords. No doubt they would have agreed wholeheartedly with Friedrich Froebel’s assessment, “A happy childhood is an unspeakably precious memory.”

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1997) 92.

<sup>2</sup>Brosterman, 93.

<sup>3</sup>Kate Douglas Wiggin, *The Kindergarten* (New York: Harper Bros., 1893) 26.

<sup>4</sup>Carol Roland, *The California Kindergarten Movement: A Study in Class and Social Feminism*.

<sup>5</sup>Helen Smith, *One Woman’s Work*, 1891.

<sup>6</sup>Smith.

<sup>7</sup>David Starr Jordan, *Educational Review*, September 6, 1893, 19.

<sup>8</sup>Jordan, 20.

<sup>9</sup>Smith.

<sup>10</sup>Wiggin, 24.

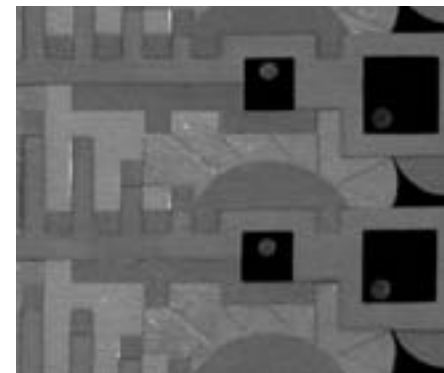
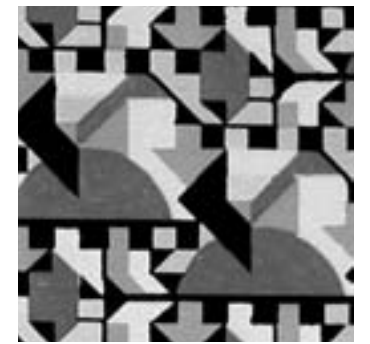
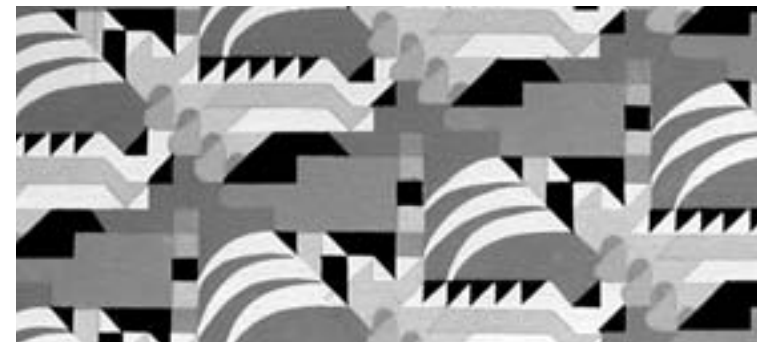
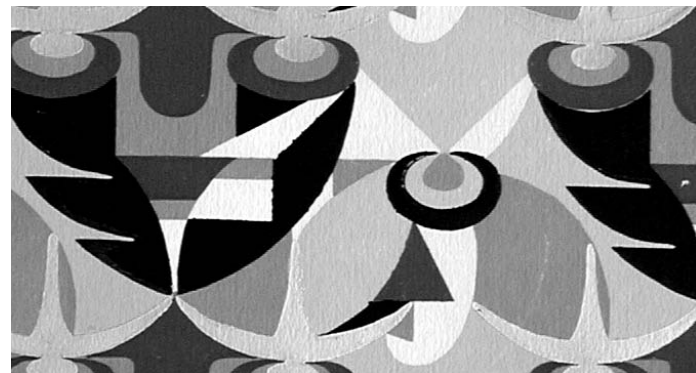




# THE MIRROR CONSIDERED:

THE CONCEPT OF  
THE SELF IN  
*THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

By Lisa Domitrovich



THE MIRROR HAS BECOME  
A KALEIDOSCOPE. WITH  
EACH TURN, NEW IMAGES OF  
SELF AND OTHER APPEAR...

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) offers a highly refracted, yet revealing lens for examining the concept of self. A work of hyper-consciousness, it is grounded in precise impressions of individual moments or, as James noted, "a crystalline record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities" (Preface 39). In this record, a ghost story that is still one of James's most popular and widely read tales, one can also detect traces of another spirit-like presence, an awareness of the modern Western philosophies of consciousness from Kant to Freud.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Kant posited the split of the self into *subject*, that which knows, and *object*, that which is known. Though split, Kant's self is of one piece, and is stable, coherent, and rational. A generation later, Hegel extended Kant's concept of the self. In Hegel's treatment the self remained whole, but became a dynamic entity: "in truth actual so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself...It is the process of its own becoming" (Hegel 53). Hegel added a complex twist by making the object of self-consciousness another self-consciousness. This doubled self enables the one to see itself in the other: "They recognize themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another" (Hegel 93; ital author).

The effect is like looking in a mirror. Unlike a neutral, inanimate mirror, however, Hegel's self-reflecting other has its own private, subjective separateness: "it is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion of itself from everything else...[and in] its being-for-self, it is an *individual*" (94). The implication of this state of pure subjectivity forms the basis of the Hegelian view of history. Each separate self, while wanting the self-confirming recognition of the other, does not, for fear of its own objectification and consequent loss of self, want to reciprocate that recognition. The result is an inherently combative relationship that manifests in the dialectical relations of history, and the tensions of James's tale.

Kant and Hegel's conclusions were drawn from methodology based on reason. But the ultimate effect of the eternally questioning stance of the reasoning mind was to turn on itself. In its logic-driven pursuit of unifying principles, the ironic discovery of science was to find instead more fragments. The decades that followed were thus marked by an eroding confidence in the ability of reason and rationality to explain the world. It seemed that the closer the scrutiny, the greater the sense of infinitude. Each fragment was itself fragmented and a vision of reality as wholeness no longer seemed possible. Even Hegel's mirror of self-consciousness, the image of the other as the source of one's own sense of self, was cracked. And in the cracks, the place Freud named "the unconscious," resided ghost-like, but powerful, forces not known by the rational mind.

In 1884, before Freud's theories were developed, Henry James declared: "Experience is never limited and never complete; it is an immense sensibility...suspended in the chamber of consciousness...it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations...[and] if experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience" (Miller 34-35). In 1890, Henry's brother William famously observed, "The consciousness of Self involves a stream of thought." This self, William said, "is a Thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but *appropriative* of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own..." (Principles 50, ital author). This is a conception of human self-consciousness as a dynamic process, a series of distinct, but connected, moments. These moments are forever in motion, generated by a view of experience as always in flux, and always subject to change. It is a mode of being that is rooted in experience, and stands apart from the capacity of reason to explain or understand. What are the implications of this way of thinking about the self? If, indeed, impressions are experience and experience engenders thought, and if thought, like impressions, are always changing, how can one be sure, in the deepest sense, of one's own self, much less of the other? In this context, the mirror has become a kaleidoscope. With each turn, new images of self and other appear.

At the center of *The Turn of the Screw* is a nameless, unrealized cipher, referred to only as "the governess." In the framing story introducing the tale, she is introduced as a woman in her early thirties, but her story takes place when she is twenty. The daughter of "poor country parson," the young woman has several sisters at home, and is educated enough to be qualified as a teacher of young children (149). At one point, there is a reference to things not going well at home, otherwise, what the reader knows about the governess is confined to the tale she relates. She is situated at the center of the household by virtue of her social status as well as by her position as narrator and protagonist.

At the top of the household order, by virtue of his wealth, his sex, and his position as the head of what remains of his little nephew and niece's family hierarchy, is the governess's employer, also nameless, only known as "the uncle." The uncle is a remote, yet all-powerful, figure who is able to raise and lower the status of all the others. He lives far away in the city; a dashing, handsome, rich, worldly gentleman, so fabulous to the awed household that he is an almost apparitional presence: "such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel" (149).

Miles and Flora, the orphaned nephew and niece, occupy a space at once above and below the governess. As children, they must obey the adults. But as members of a higher class, it is only a matter of time before they rise above their teacher.

Just below the governess in the domestic hierarchy is Mrs. Grose. Formerly maid to the uncle's mother, Mrs. Grose has transcended the other servants to be recognized as the individual who, by virtue of her constant presence, is the linchpin of household order. She is, nonetheless, "belowstairs only" (150). At the bottom are "the others," servants virtually invisible and indistinguishable in the narrative. In contrast to the uncle who is present in his absence, and the housekeeper, who is present in her presence, they are absent in their presence.

In selecting her from among the many candidates he interviewed, the uncle has bestowed upon the governess authority for the first time in her young life. This validating gift of recognition by the master to his servant becomes the driving force of all the governess's actions throughout the story. Implicit in the relations between the two is Hegel's notion of the intense struggle between the two self-consciousnesses. The uncle reinforces his sense of self, of authority, by granting authority to the governess. He does not want to be reminded of his need for her recognition of him, however, and attaches a stringent stipulation to the terms of her employment. It is only the governess's love and desire to maintain the uncle's elevating recognition that enables her to accept the strange condition that she must, at any cost, stay out of contact with him, remain out of his consciousness. The uncle's need to dominate in this fashion, to pull the strings while remaining offstage, extends to his relationships with all the characters in *The Turn of the Screw*. Hence the children's letters to him are never mailed, he is not told of his nephew's expulsion from school, and the governess's own letter to him is stolen.

The insecurity with which the governess accepts her position and its accompanying responsibilities is conveyed in the first sentence of her story: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong" (152). This is a snapshot of instability, the condition of modernity, where reason is replaced by the Jamesian concept of experience.

Significantly, the governess's statement reveals itself as memory. A Nietzschean perspective on the use of memory in *The Turn of the Screw* as it relates to the concept of the self would focus not on the heroic task of the governess's narrative to vividly render the fleeting moments of subjective experience to the reader, but would instead look behind the story to the question of motive.

Nietzsche observed that conscious thinking is instinctual, and that the instinct it serves is the self's own preservation. It is because of this self-serving instinct that memory can be, and in fact often is, false, illustrating the general idea of "untruth as a condition of life" (Nietzsche 7). What is in question is not the veracity of the statement that the governess's moods are unstable, but rather her real reason for remembering the experience and producing the manuscript upon which the tale is based. The Nietzschean view would be that the governess's manuscript is not the objective document the reader may assume it to be. Such a view, which many readers have taken, would hold that her story might not be the product of a desire to communicate a rational, scientifically precise, account of her consciousness in the face of the irrationality of ghosts. It may be instead a self-serving fabrication, an excuse for her excessively self-regarding behavior throughout the story, behavior ultimately resulting in the death of a child.

The governess believes Mrs. Grose to be so naively honest as to be incapable of any Nietzschean act of untruth. To the governess, the housekeeper, like the full-length mirror in her room at Bly, reflects the teacher's image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: "I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my superiority—my accomplishments and my function—in her patience under my pain" (203). Nonetheless, the governess displays a Hegelian impulse to destroy the recognizing other. Unlike the uncle, however, she does this not by banishment, but by absorption. "I somehow took her manner as a kind of comforting pledge—never falsified thank heaven!—that we should on every question be quite at one. Oh she was glad I was there!" (Turn 155). Conjoined in her own mind with the housekeeper, the governess precludes the possibility for the other to exist independently. The internalization of Mrs. Grose's conscious self by the governess, and the housekeeper's willing compliance, also illuminates Nietzsche's theory of the will. His idea is that in any exercise of the will, the one that wills both commands and obeys. In her conflation of the housekeeper's self with her own, the governess both commands and feels the impact of the command. As Nietzsche put it, "L'effet c'est moi," (Nietzsche 19). Or, in the words of Mrs. Grose, "How can I if you don't imagine?" (172).

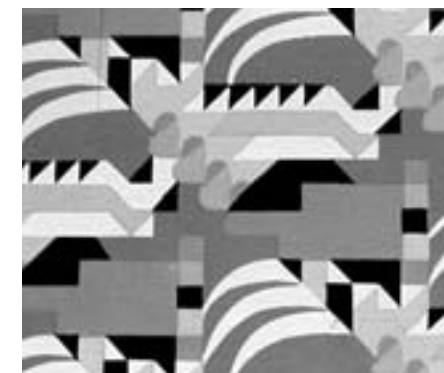
The governess's interpretation or, in Nietzschean terms, the story she has made up, is that Miles is a threat. This becomes the justification for her increasingly paranoid actions. But this view of Miles was not apparent when the governess first met the boy: The governess's response to Miles then echoes her feelings toward the uncle, whose handsome charisma had the same effect of sweeping her off her feet. Her reaction to the uncle and nephew differs only in its 'tender' quality; Miles is still a boy, and she is responsible for his care. The growing sense of his coming into his own and his emerging rebelliousness, however, eventually marks the boy as a threat to the authority vested in her, the teacher, by the uncle. At first, though, her time with Miles causes the governess to experience an intoxicating expansion of self. Note that again the governess is calling attention to the fact of her memory, which she uses in the manuscript to justify her story:

What I look back at with amazement is the situation I accepted. [...] Lessons with me indeed, that charming summer, we all had a theory that he was to have; but I now feel that for weeks the lessons must have been rather my own. I learnt something—at first certainly—that had not been one of the teachings of my small smothered life; learnt to be amused, and even amusing, and not to think for the morrow. It was the first time, in a manner, that I had known space and air and freedom, all the music of summer and all the mystery of nature. And then there was consideration—and consideration was sweet. Oh it was a trap—not designed but deep—to my imagination, to my delicacy, perhaps to my vanity; to whatever in me was most excitable (162).

And what woman in her position could have resisted the charms of this boy? He teaches her something no one else has. By seeing through the boy's eyes, the governess gains knowledge of herself previously unavailable and unknown, a knowledge of joy and music and freedom and living in the present moment. She revels in this purely experiential world, but in retrospect sees this gift as a *trap*. For there is a dark side to the privileging of experience over reason: the object of her love and pity, her pupil, the subject of her authority, has become not the recipient, but the bestower, of knowledge. Thus, Miles is no longer the pliant object of her sense of superiority. Moreover, contradictory to the Hegelian concept of the destroying self-consciousness, she needs Miles to continue to experience the pleasurable sensations she cannot generate on her own.

James's use of the word *consideration* in this passage is a revealing window into the complex relationship between the governess and Miles. Consideration can mean *attention*, which the governess gives to boy in excessive amounts. It also can mean *esteem*; though a threat, charming, brilliant Miles also comes off as practically an angel in the governess's eyes. *Motive* is yet another possible definition, the boy's imagined offenses spur his teacher into a frenzied state. All these meanings apply, but the definition of consideration as *payment* is the most intriguing.

In exchange for her guidance and care, the governess expects Miles to repay her by reflecting a sense of her self as a wise, loving, and effective authority figure. And, for a while, the governess receives the payment she desires, the love and respect of the children: "They were at this period extravagantly and preternaturally fond of me; which, after all, I could reflect, was no more than a graceful response in children perpetually bowed down over and hugged" (193). The teacher's self-serving interpretation of her charge's behavior begins to transform, however, as she realizes that maybe she was neither significant nor necessary to them, and that where as she: "walked in a world of their invention—they had no occasion whatever to draw upon mine" (180)<sup>2</sup>.



...HOW CAN ONE BE  
SURE, IN THE DEEPEST  
SENSE, OF ONE'S  
OWN SELF, MUCH LESS  
THE OTHER?

Her unease increases when Miles and Flora begin to relentlessly question the circumstances of the governess's life before coming to Bly. Ceaselessly probing the depths of her memory, the children were eventually, "in possession of everything that had ever happened to me" (211). Her situation has been reversed; instead of becoming "rich" both in the terms of her relationship with the children and the status afforded by her position at Bly, the governess has been impoverished. By bringing to light all the details of her life as a poor parson's daughter, the children have objectified their teacher to the point where it is clear that she is no longer fit for her job.

Miles has already shown that he knows more than the governess can teach him and he asks when he is to go back to school. He says it is because "he wants to see more life" (217). This is the ultimate rejection to the governess's sense of self: her life, having been thoroughly plundered, both as teacher and as an individual, is now no longer of interest. Miles administers the crushing blow toward the end of the story when the servants have exited the formal dining room in which he and his teacher are seated: "Of course if we're alone together it's you that are alone the most" (254).

With little imagination of her own and lacking resources of wealth or status, the governess has been used up by Miles or, in the Hegelian sense, destroyed by the self-recognizing other. She is indeed alone. Nonetheless, she still controls the boy's fate. In the final scene, the governess tells the boy, "I have you" and in the clutches of her smothering embrace, Miles dies, his heart having been "dispossessed" (261, 262). Whether he dies from fright or asphyxiation, the frustrated reader will never know. In any case, the governess received the ultimate consideration—Miles is no longer an obstruction between her and the uncle.

*Possession*, of course, has another, highly resonant, connotation. Whether the ghosts in the story are "real" or hallucinations, their psychic significance bears great weight in relation to the idea of the self in *The Turn of the Screw*. Be they unnatural or supernatural, ghosts inherently repeat fixed identity and are thus an apt metaphor for an unstable sense of self. Neither quite alive nor fully dead, ghosts defy reason while mirroring and exaggerating the disquieting questions of consciousness and appearance. Even more disconcerting, ghosts are pure experience, they don't explain, they just are. Witnesses must invariably create for themselves the story behind their appearance. In this way ghosts are mirror-like, the element of self-reflection always in play.

By the end of the story, the governess cannot abide what she sees in her own looking glass; she declares war not only on the ghosts and the supernatural, but also on nature. Her weapons against her foes are the imagined strength of her will and the equally fictional coherence of her self:

Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not (181)...how my equilibrium depended on the success of rigid will, the will to shut my eyes as tight as possible to the truth that what I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature. I could only get on at all by taking 'nature' into my confidence and my account, by treating my monstrous ordeal as a push in a direction unusual, of course, and unpleasant, but demanding after all, for a fair front, only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue. No attempt, nonetheless, could well require more tact than just this attempt to supply, one's self, all of nature (250-51).

But it is a task at which she must fail. Once the eyes have been opened, it is hardly possible to keep them "shut tight" again, no matter how rigid the will, nor how persuasive the story, true or invented. That extraordinarily twisted sentence, "Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not," takes what is left of the rational construct of the governess's self and the mirroring other, and blasts it straight back into the realm of the fragmented chaos of the modern sensibility and the newly "discovered" unconscious.

In describing *The Turn of the Screw* in the preface to the 1910 New York Edition, James said of his tale: "The charm of all these things for the distracted modern mind is in the clear field of experience, as I call it, over which we are led to roam; an annexed but independent world in which nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it" (37). With *The Turn of the Screw*, one of the few first person narratives in his fiction, James has imagined a ghost story, a story also haunted, in a very real way, by the spirits of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud. More than a century later *The Turn of the Screw* remains very much alive—and still provoking some very confusing and unsettling reflections on the nature of the self, the question of objective "truth," and the challenge of fully understanding one's own sense of identity and reality.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Contrast this with the sensibility of Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), where the mysteries of life are not transformed into revelation, but revealed as machination, and taught as lesson. Or with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), where external reality is minutely rendered as bare description, with neither explanation nor description.

<sup>2</sup> Forty years after Hegel, Karl Marx developed his idea of alienated labor. It suggests that when the worker becomes objectified, as happens in the capitalist system, he is no longer in possession of the essence of himself, his work or labor. His work therefore no longer contributes to his own well being, but rather to that of his boss, resulting in a split between himself and his labor. While Marx was explicitly referring to labor in a manufacturing sense, the concept of alienation has been appropriated in the twentieth century to refer to any condition of estrangement from oneself. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx referred to the impending communist revolution as a "spectre," a ghostly presence hanging over Europe.

James was not familiar with the idea of self-estrangement as we know it but he apparently did not share with Marx (and Hegel) the role of work, of making things with one's hands, in shaping self-identity. The governess views her sewing as a cover, "my hypocrisy of work" (253), behind which she watches, plots, and obsesses over the children. Her real work is as an educator, but in that her training and ability is insufficient.

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As an epic, *The Odyssey* is, by title and definition, a song that glorifies its hero. In a deft reversal of formula, Homer also uses his hero to glorify the song and its singer—that is to say, to glorify himself. *Kleos* (“fame, glory”) is central to the hero’s quest for a form of immortality, and in this case, the bard subtly seeks a share of the fame he is commissioned to perpetuate. In the epic’s climactic sequence, Odysseus stars in his own homecoming battle just as the singer of heroic songs would star in the homecoming banquet, and Homer frames the entire battle as a metaphorical feast, replete with music and hearty fare. In employing food and song as a subtext upon which the hero enacts his own homecoming celebration, Homer succeeds in reflexively casting a glorious light on himself and his own poetic art.

The key link between hero and singer occurs in an epic simile—the distinctive form of extended metaphor originating with Homer—comparing the respective instruments of warrior and bard. The operative scene, from Book 21, is a famous one. Odysseus, after an absence of almost twenty years, has returned home in disguise to find suitors besieging his wife Penelope who, ostensibly unaware of her husband’s presence, has issued the challenge of the bow: whoever can string Odysseus’s hunting bow and make the difficult shot through twelve axe helms will earn her hand in marriage. The suitors, having tried and failed to even string the great bow, have given up the attempt.

Homer strategically places the musical simile at the center of a passage that is itself rich in connections of auditory elements to meaning. As Odysseus, still disguised as the old beggar, lovingly examines the bow just delivered to him by the loyal swineherd Eumaeus, he elicits a cacophony of “jeering” and “taunting” (21.443) from the suitors. The dissonance of their shouts underscores the glaring ironic incongruities contained in the taunts themselves. One suitor mockingly wonders if the old man perhaps has bows like this one “stored in his house” (21.445), not yet realizing that the lord of *this* house (which is, of course, “his house”) is in fact home to reclaim what belongs to him. Another suitor exclaims,

“Look how he twists and turns it in his hands!” (21.447), not only invoking the epic’s first epithet (Book 1, line 1’s *polytropos*, “man of twists and turns”) for the hero Odysseus, but also providing a grimly ironic preview of the “virtuoso ease” (21.456) with which the hero will soon string the instrument of the suitors’ own destruction. A final “cocksure lord” derisively wishes the old man good luck (21.449) immediately before the full extent of the good fortune and divine will favoring Odysseus is revealed with ultimate force and clarity.

At the height of this disorder, with the impudent upstarts tormenting the rightful king, Homer employs an overtly self-aware epic simile to illustrate the skill with which Odysseus will at last bring his world back into harmony:

[L]ike an expert singer skilled at lyre and song—  
 who strains a string to a new peg with ease,  
 making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end—  
 so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.  
 Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch  
 And under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow’s cry. (21.453-458)

## “ALL THAT CROWNS A FEAST”: KLEOS AND BARDIC SELF-REFERENCE IN THE ODYSSEY

By Bryon Williams

Here, in the scene of highest drama in the entire epic, what leads the poet to convey the supreme skill of the hero’s feat with an intricate analogy to his own craft? To say that Homer, singer himself even as he delivers the lines above, simply selects an image close at hand surely misses a deeper intent; citing his own art to express the expertise required at such a critical moment is more than a matter of convenience. More likely, Homer consciously appropriates the glory of the singularly heroic deed to carve for himself a portion of the *kleos* to which he aspires. The crucial function of the simile is that it casts glory on both the hero *and* the bard, linking them inextricably as the poem’s climax begins to unfold.

In a move that cements this bond between singer and hero, Odysseus plucks a “clear and sharp” note upon the bow’s string. The note has obvious dramatic effects on a literal level, immediately silencing the discordant and raucous jeers as “[h]orror swept through the suitors, [their] faces blanching white” (21.459) and setting the stage for Odysseus to reveal himself at last. Figuratively, this note is indeed the pitch to which the entire epic song of Odysseus must be tuned, sounding the formal announcement that long-delayed order will be now be restored.

This order extends beyond just the realm of human conflict, as the string’s note receives an immediate answer from the heavens: “Zeus cracked the sky with a bolt, his blazing sign, / and the man who had borne so much rejoiced at last / that the son of cunning Cronus flung that omen down for *him*” (21.460-462). As with the note Odysseus plucks above, a dramatic sound maximizes the literal tension in the scene; in the horror-stricken silence, with the import of the string’s note resonating still, Zeus’s thunderbolt sounds an unmistakable knell for the suitors’ imminent deaths. Even more significant, however, are the metaphorical ways in which Homer again links Odysseus’s heroic role to his own poetic activity. In the epic simile, Homer has already directly linked the musical instrument of the bard to the hero’s instrument, the bow. The sign from heaven signals a more profound parallel between singer and hero: just as the bard is the divinely-sanctioned voice of the Muse, the instrument through which the goddess delivers her divine song, so Odysseus is the agent of divine justice, the instrument through which the gods will restore order to the human world. When we recall that Zeus opens the entire narrative proper (1.37 ff.) with the topic of justice for mortals, it becomes evident that the thunderbolt attributed to the god in the epic’s climactic sequence ratifies Odysseus as the agent selected to carry out divine justice and to ensure that the various parties in the human conflict receive what they each deserve.

A song of gods and heroes accompanies a festive meal, of course—“the ringing lyre [is] the friend of feasts” (17.296-297), we are told—and Homer makes clear that Odysseus’s metaphorical song of revenge also occurs in the context of a figurative feast. Now that the featured instrument has been tuned, Odysseus prepares to play host to his own homecoming banquet. The bowstring’s clarion call and heaven’s fateful thunder combine to serve as a dinner summons, commanding the reluctant attention of the suitors, the feast’s self-invited guests. Odysseus’s first action following this call is to pick up a lone arrow lying, fittingly enough, “bare on the board” (21.464), that is, on the banquet table. This arrow, unique in being unsheathed and ready at hand, serves a symbolic function as the means by which Odysseus, unique among men, may complete the test of the bow and thereby signal that he alone is worthy to host the feast to come. Just before Odysseus notches the arrow taken



from the dining table, the feasting context is made even more explicit: “the rest [of the arrows] still bristled deep inside the quiver, / soon to be tasted by all the feasters there” (21.465-466). As in the lyre simile, Homer again plants a seed reminding us that the test of the bow is a preview encapsulating the elements of the song and feast that Odysseus will enact in the subsequent battle. If the bowstring’s note serves as the prelude to the heroic song soon to be carried out, Homer makes it clear that the single arrow with which Odysseus proves himself is a foretaste of the main course at the banquet to come.

Odysseus’s next actions and words conclude his metaphorical address of welcome to the guests. He completes the challenge of the bow by threading the axes cleanly with the arrow (which, in the silence already noted, surely contributes its own ominous sounds as it whistles through and its “weighted brazen head” sticks beyond) and follows the deed with the words of a host eager to mete out generous servings of justice to his guests: “[T]he hour has come to serve our masters right — / supper in broad daylight — then to other revels, / song and dancing, all that crowns a feast” (21.477-479).

Homer immediately crowns his own poetic feast — the long-awaited climax of the epic itself — with the opening actions of the slaughter that follows. After a brief prayer to Apollo (at this juncture, a brilliant nod on the poet’s part to the god of the lyre and the bow), Odysseus’s first target is the suitor Antinous, who, while lifting a cup of wine to his lips, takes an arrow “square in the throat” (22.15). His “life-blood came spurting / from his nostrils” (22.18-19), and as his fall upsets the table, “food showered across the floor, / the bread and meats soaked in a swirl of bloody filth” (22.20-21). The leader Antinous is the most offensive of the dishonorable guests, and seeing his life-blood spilled to mingle with *Odysseus’s* wine and his body fall to lie in a gruesome heap among the food of *Odysseus’s* house confirms that this is, above all, a feast that commemorates righting the scales of justice.

In Odysseus’s own words, “song . . . crowns a feast,” and Homer’s culminating act of self-reference has a singer emerge from the bloody feast unscathed. After ruthlessly rejecting a series of pleas for mercy during the slaughter, Odysseus is approached by the bard Phemius, who has witnessed the carnage and is, remarkably, still “clutching his ringing lyre in his hands” (22.350). His instrument and his vocation save his life. He clasps Odysseus’s knees and says to him, “What a grief it will be to you for all the years to come / if you kill the singer now, who sings for gods and men . . . I’m fit to sing for you as for a god” (22.363-364, 367). Phemius appeals to Odysseus’s need to have an inspired bard sing *for* him, but the larger implication following such a dramatic homecoming is that Odysseus will need someone to sing *of* him. This becomes apparent when we note that Odysseus follows his triumphant deeds by sparing *only* those whose roles entail spreading the good news of his homecoming: the herald, who carries messages bearing the king’s name, and the bard, who composes the songs bearing the hero’s name for all time.

So it is, in the end, that the hero and the bard need each other, as Homer affirms that perhaps the very concept of epic hero results only from the marriage of deed and song, and that neither is sufficient without the other. In a series of twists and turns worthy of his hero Odysseus, Homer serves himself an equal helping of glory in his own epic song.

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# PILGRIM HAVEN



I take a wrong turn toward cows and horses grazing.  
How can a mistake be so beautiful? Fog nestles in green valleys.  
Tail lights blink as they disappear into white darkness. Ahead,  
a good golden sunrise after so many blood red dawns.

There were a few birds outside my window this morning.  
Not songsters, twits—making the most of cemeteries. This  
inability to move on, this having to study low hills form a barely  
discernable skyline, granite headstones multiplying on the slopes.

My pilgrimage ends in a parking lot, under an oak that drips sap.  
Next door, school kids trade soccer kicks. The fence is gated; the gate  
is unlocked. The distinction between outdoors and in blurs to inconsequence.  
The breeze is chill; the chill’s a breeze. Put on a sweater; write a letter.

People move here to die and, when they do, the receptionist sets a framed  
announcement on the lamp table, as much to keep the community informed  
as to help it grieve. Wouldn’t want someone to knock too gingerly at a new  
widow’s door. Death is the angel who answers the last prayer.

The way north is uphill, but also beautiful. Each evening the sky’s a different  
vision. Rachmaninoff swoons in my speakers. At 65 miles per hour, nothing  
is steadier than a driver’s gaze, fixed on nothing in particular, gauging  
the odds, glimpsing what is never more than glimpsed—home.

*By Tamara Tinker*

# FISH AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

By Mason Tobak



Contemporary critical theorist Stanley Fish is a confident thinker. In attempting to define the nature of meaning in literature, language, and in human life broadly, he presents his trademark brand of reception theory with uncompromising firmness and clarity. For Fish, the reader's mind is undisputed sovereign, effortlessly pulling rank on the barely-existing author or text, in the three-way competition for the right to make meaning. According to Fish, the reader determines meaning absolutely and completely, making virtually incoherent any central concern with writers' intentions or the nature of the textual object itself. However, this hegemonic reader does not act as an autonomous entity, as it might at first seem. He/she is born of a specific "interpretive community," a property of the surrounding culture, the rules of which confluently merge with all individuals in a society to effectively limit the range of meanings that are imposed by any reader upon literature or, indeed upon any object (335). This community influence prevents the sort of interpretive anarchy that might develop if such a restraining influence did not exist.

In his 1980 book *Is There a Text in this Class?* Fish concisely presents the details of this theory within an essay entitled "How To Recognize a Poem When You See One." Here the author offers an anecdote

from his own experience, in which he presented a list of six authors' names to one class as a homework reading assignment, then told the next class of the day that the list, still on the board, was a religious poem for them to analyze. The students in the second class constructed a sophisticated critical analysis of the list as though it were a poem. Given the essay reader's knowledge of the true sequence of events, the students' analysis seems to contain a lunacy of disproportionate complexity and detail. Fish explains that he repeated this experiment numerous times in a number of different countries and contexts, and always found that students constructed analyses of the list as though it were a real poem. Fish uses this finding to support the idea that a poem is a poem only because the reader makes it so. The ideas or intentions of the author, or the nature of the written material itself, are of little importance in defining a particular piece as a poem, or in creating the meaning of the piece; the nature of and meaning of a piece, that is, the way in which the reader "interprets" the piece, arises only from the mind of the reader. The poem is the reader's "constructed artifact" (331). "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them," says Fish (337).

Thus far, given the uniqueness of each reader, one might expect an unwieldy assortment of meanings in any society, each collection of words of whatever nature and from whatever source generating millions of equally valid interpretations. This does not happen, Fish says, because every person's mind is a product of an "interpretive community." "The self does not exist apart from the communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations (of thinking, seeing, reading) ... the self is ... not an independent entity but ... a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it" (335).

These, then, are Fish's two essential ideas: firstly, human beings impose meaning onto language, and onto objects of any sort, rather than language or objects having innate meaning that they impose onto human beings, and secondly, this human imposition of meaning is informed by and constrained by the "systems of intelligibility" that have been infused into individuals by their culture. The human imposition of meaning would be impossible without the self formed by these cultural forces. To put it simply, cultural forces are responsible for forming individuals, who consist of roughly similar palettes of interpretive strategies; the individuals then use these strategies to create roughly similar meanings in the world. There is no meaning that does not arise through this two-step process.

Fish is articulate. As a seasoned professor working with linguistics and literature, he uses words well, and presents a case that appears to flow logically. His convincing essay likely induces many readers to reflect on their own "interpretive communities," and

to examine the ways in which they themselves exude waves of meaning onto all the otherwise meaningless words and objects they encounter. For Fish's sake, it is hoped that they stop there; a bit of further reflection reveals his theory to be poorly thought through, as we shall see.

Let's consider a person reading a poem. On the surface, it is plausible that this person sees the poem as a poem only because of rules of interpreting that preexist within the reader's own head, and not because of an author, or elements of the text. Indeed, as implied by Fish, it is similarly plausible that the reader sees the words as words, the black marks on the white page as black marks on a white page, the piece of paper as a piece of paper, the mass in space as a mass in space, and so on, only because of interpretive strategies preexisting within his/her own head. It is plausible that there is no meaning that is not imposed by a human mind onto the world.

Let's start again. It is plausible that an individual's culture "fills the individual's brain" with whatever tools and strategies are necessary to engage in acts of meaning-creation (333). It is plausible that, without this cultural input, there is no self, and there is no possibility of creating meaning. It is plausible that there is no meaning unless the world imposes a structure onto a human mind.

These two very plausible, but non-miscible points of view are famous. Their respective philosophical thrusts, in numerous incarnations, have formed the essential arguments underlying modern Western epistemology, and in the hands of the rationalists and the empiricists, respectively, fueled many of the arguments of famous philosophers for centuries

THE INADEQUACY OF FISH'S  
THEORY CREATES A CLOUD OVER  
ALL HIS IDEAS...

following Descartes. By the eighteenth century, in fact, each of the two types of arguments offered by Fish were already old news, in Germany, France, England, Holland, America, and elsewhere. The human mind imposes meaning onto the world. The world imposes meaning onto the human mind.

Few, however, speaking whatever language, have attempted to claim both simultaneously, as Fish does. He is adamant that there is no meaning unless a human being imposes one onto something. He is also adamant that there is no meaning unless something imposes one onto a human being. He says both things with equal vigor, simultaneously. Such a simply blended argument cannot stand as is, but Fish offers us no qualifications.

Let's return to our Fishian person, sitting at a desk reading a book. Fish tells us that, without any exception or doubt, any meaning the person derives from the reading is meaning constructed by the person himself. It is clear that Fish thinks it is impossible for the language in the book to have inherent absolute meaning that is simply perceived by and understood by the person. How does the person construct the perceived meaning of the book? He/she uses rules provided by the surrounding culture, by the "interpretive community." He/she is not an autonomous interpreting self, but is the product of a culture molding him/her from its systems of understanding.

But Fish does not share with us the detailed nature of this molding process. He simply demands that we accept its power and importance. What is it? How is the person molded, and when? How does the transfer from culture to individual occur? What does this vital, self-giving, interpretation-allowing process look like? There is no way to know what Fish would answer, but it is likely he would say that a combination of parental child-rearing, schooling, religious training, peer-group experiences, and the like were the cultural forces that shaped this person, and provided him/her with a self and the tools necessary to interpret and understand the world. To what does such a claim translate on a day-to-day experiential level? It translates into an infinite array of things, but includes lectures from father, reading books in school, writing notes to

friends, overhearing strangers, telling stories in church. All of these things, in thousands of instances, are language-based molding experiences. The person was shaped by his culture to a great extent by listening and speaking and writing and reading language.

But Fish has spent manypithy, articulate pages convincing us that the language in the world means nothing unless we impose meaning onto it ourselves. How can the Fishian person during this formative time impose meaning onto language by him/herself? He/she has never been supplied with the culturally-generated interpretation rules to do so, and it is not clear how he/she could, for the first time, be given such rules. Any "first" attempt by the culture to provide these rules must be substantially language-based, and our young person has no way of ingesting and understanding such language. If our young person is capable of imposing meaning onto such "first" rules, it must mean that there were "earlier" interpretation rules already in place, preexisting the incoming "first" interpretation rules. But these "earlier" rules face the same problem that the now-misnamed "first" rules faced—they must have been provided by a culture, and there must be "even earlier" rules in place to interpret them, and so forth. This is circular reasoning: our culture trains us using language to be able to make meaning, then we make the meaning of the language used to train us. Our ability to interpret must be informed by an underlying cultural rule, but every cultural rule requires a pre-existing ability to interpret.

Fish must break his reasoning circle at some point, as there is no logically-sound possibility in his scheme that the untaught person can impose meaning onto the first set of language-based interpretive rules. In attempting to salvage his theory, Fish can make either of two possible moves: there must be (1) at least some language-based cultural rules that are absolutely meaningful without requiring human interpretation in order to be so, or (2) at least some human interpretive ability exists *a priori*, without having been generated or informed by underlying cultural rules.

Let us look at the first sort of modification. Fish could say that, at some point upstream in the process of an individual's cultural molding, language intro-

duced from outside has inherent meaning, if only to give the Fishian person the tools necessary to allow him to then take over the task of imposing meaning onto the world on his own. During an early formative period, the human mind does not impose meaning upon the world, but once meaning is imposed by the world onto the human mind, and initial rules for meaning-creation are put in place, a light switch flicks, and, from then on, meaning is exclusively imposed by the mind upon the world. This version stands as a theory, but, if the human mind is capable of extracting absolute meaning from language, even if only during a formative time, even if only for a moment, how can Fish be certain that this process becomes disabled? Why is it not always present subtly or intermittently? Does the switch flick at age five? Does it flick at different times for people in enriched environments, or for people in different language environments or cultures? Further, the very possibility of absolute meaning in the world outside the person's head is devastating to the strong epistemological point of Fish's original theory, converting his theory into an uncertain chronology of human development rather than a categorical claim about the nature of meaning.

Regarding the second sort of modification, Fish could say that the initial tools necessary to impose meaning onto the world are genetic and inborn. Such a priori tools could be used throughout one's life, or could be used only initially to interpret the "first" incoming cultural instructions, after which all further meaning would be constructed as in Fish's original theory. Though this modified theory would preserve the idea of the human later imposing meaning onto the outside world after receiving cultural instruction, the move would convert the foundation of that portion of Fish's theory that is culturally deterministic into biological determinism, and the power source for his "interpretive community" into a strand of DNA.

In overview, then, Fish minimally must account for the ability of the human being to learn language-based rules for interpretation, before the human mind has been trained to have any structure that would allow it to impose anything on anything. He must

admit the existence of a mechanism for this, either resulting from some early externally meaningful process or from a DNA-born a priori ability. Refusal to do either leaves him with a flawed, poorly-reasoned proposal. The circular-reasoning problem, in which any cultural "first" language would require an earlier language already in place, in order that the "first" language's meaning could result from human-imposed interpretation onto the world, cannot be resolved without some modification of his original theory.

Fish's ideas, despite their academic halo, are intellectually sophomoric. He attempts to force fit centuries-old mutually incompatible epistemologies with a sort of smooth rhetorical desk-pounding, ignoring the illusory nature of the result. The existence of circular reasoning, and the choice of remedial ideas to which a reflective reader is logically led by Fish's claims—a mysterious, undefined moment in each person's life when meaning is imposed by language, never to be repeated, or biological determinism masquerading as cultural determinism—are unsatisfying. The inadequacy of Fish's theory creates a cloud over all his ideas, a cloud that must be dispelled by him or others before a serious search is launched for his hegemonic reader or his "interpretive communities," illusory abstractions that cannot exist in the form he suggests.

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# ANY FISH YOU WISH: TRAWLING FOR ANSWERS IN AN UNSTABLE WORLD

By Steve Zabriskie



Stanley Fish is widely considered to be one of the most original and important literary theorists in contemporary arts and letters. In spite of this fact (or perhaps because of it) he is a favorite target of just about anyone who has a bone to pick with American culture. Often lumped under the amorphous category “post-modernist,” a label Richard Rorty has described as “the worst thing one intellectual can call another,” Fish has proven to be especially loathsome to the virtue-obsessed guardians of morality on the American right. These right wingers view Fish as a truth-hating nihilist on a mission to spread a set of “very dangerous ideas” including what one critic has described as “radical cultural relativism, nonjudgmentalism, and a post-modern conviction that there are no moral norms or truths worth defending” (Leo). In this view Fish is a cynical and unprincipled sophist who makes his living chipping away at our sacred foundations of truth, virtue, and justice—ideals threatened on every side by politically correct multiculturalists, uppity feminists, and other anti-American crusaders. The disease afflicting our nation, they believe, is cultural relativism and Stanley Fish is one of its most virulent agents.

Not to be outdone, Fish has been attacked with equal if not greater force by critics on the left who view him as a poser liberal standing for nothing but an empty ethos of political quietism. This version of Stanley Fish is a critic who adopts an ostensibly leftist stance, but whose agenda lacks any real critical edge

since his skepticism about universal principles undermines any attempt at a substantive critique of the status quo on principled grounds. This Fish is an apologist for the status quo and moreover, a stooge of the established and increasingly corporatist academy. One of the harshest critics in this camp is Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton, who has challenged Fish’s putatively left-wing credentials calling him a “saber rattling polemicist” and a “a brash, noisy entrepreneur of the intellect” who is “about as left-wing as Donald Trump.”

It is mysterious why Fish should draw so much ire since his essays deal with such seemingly innocuous subjects as how to recognize a poem, evaluating different strategies of textual interpretation, and understanding how language and literature correlate. These are not exactly hot-button political issues, but the implications are taken very seriously by critics on all sides.

So when MLA alumnus Mason Tobak accuses Fish of being “intellectually sophomoric” and his theory of being “poorly thought through,” he does so within a long tradition of Fish-baiters whose net is very wide indeed. It is clear that Mason Tobak is no fan of Fish and that he has plenty of company, but on what grounds does he criticize Fish so vehemently? The set of claims and counter claims in Tobak’s review of *Is There a Text In This Class?* can be tricky to untangle but to sum up, the following is a reconstruction of his argument:

1. Tobak claims that Fish claims that language on its own is absolutely meaningless, and that words acquire meaning only after someone receives them and assigns them a meaning. Words mean nothing on their own, and “the reader determines meaning absolutely and completely,” according to Tobak’s reading of Fish.
2. Each reader is a member of an “interpretive community” that provides the rules for what counts as an acceptable interpretation and what does not, thereby constraining the total universe of possible interpretations for any given sentence.
3. Knowing the rules of one’s interpretive community is a necessary pre-condition for being able to assign meaning to language. Interpretation is therefore a two-step process for Tobak’s version of Fish: first one receives language, and then one assigns meaning to it according to the rules one has learned from the interpretive community.
4. The clincher: If one cannot understand language without a set of interpretive rules to tell you how to decipher the meaning of words and sentences, it would be impossible to learn the interpretive rules in the first place. That is because in order to learn them, these rules would have to be communicated linguistically but if interpretive rules are not already in place, the sentences that convey these rules would be unintelligible. Since Fish doesn’t describe how these interpretive rules are communicated, or why communicating them is not impossible according to his own argument, Fish has either contradicted himself or his theory rests on an infinite regress (i.e. it demands interpretive rules for understanding the interpretive rules, and so on).
5. Therefore, Stanley Fish is wrong and intellectually sophomoric.

At first glance this critique of Fish is interesting and provocative. But because it rests on a misapprehension

of Fish’s claims, Tobak’s argument is quickly revealed to be toothless. Tobak’s version of Fish holds that all interpretive acts consist of two steps: first, you receive the words that are being communicated (utterances, poems, novels, whatever) and second, you assign meaning to them according to a received set of interpretive rules. His critique rests entirely on this point—Fish’s failure, Tobak claims, is that his theory of interpretation involves a two-step process that can’t account for how its own rules could possibly come into existence.

Throughout his discussion on language, Fish goes out of his way to emphasize that his theory of interpretation is most assuredly *not* the two-step process described by Tobak. Fish couldn’t be clearer on this point than he is on page 310 of *Is There a Text in This Class?* He explains:

[No one is] free to confer on an utterance any meaning he likes. Indeed, “confer” is exactly the wrong word because it implies a two-stage procedure in which a reader or hearer first scrutinizes an utterance and then gives it a meaning. The argument of the preceding pages can be reduced to the assertion that there is no such first stage, that one hears an utterance within, and not as preliminary to determining, a knowledge of its purposes and concerns, and that to so hear it is already to have assigned it a shape and given it a meaning. In other words, the problem of how meaning is determined is only a problem if there is a point at which its determination has not yet been made, and I am saying that there is no such point.

Fish insists that because words are communicated within a context that defines the interpretations in advance, by the time words reach their destination the interpretive community has already done its work. The hearer doesn’t learn the interpretive community’s rules and then apply those rules to language in order to determine which of all possible interpretations is correct. The hearer hears language from within an interpretive community, which is what defines

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the appropriate interpretation before the message even reaches its destination. When the message does reach the hearer, the determination of meaning has already occurred—outside the mind of the hearer—by filtering words through a context that gives them shape and meaning.

In light of this passage, one might be puzzled why Tobak would describe Fish's position as stipulating that an individual learns the rules of the interpretive community and then applies those rules to create meaning out of sentences. Tobak writes that according to Fish "there is no meaning that does not arise through this two-step process." Yet in the passage above and elsewhere Fish states unambiguously that no such two-step process exists.

How does such a misinterpretation arise when Fish so strenuously asserts the opposite, plain as day, right there in the text? Do texts not mean what they say, even the texts of a skeptic like Stanley Fish? Because Tobak's argument hinges on this crucial misperception of Fish's position—a position Fish takes great pains to distance himself from—the argument is easily dismissed. Fortunately for us, however, Tobak's argument is still relevant to the discussion, if unintentionally so.

After Tobak's argument vanishes into smoke, two interesting questions remain: First, if Fish's position is not the one described by Tobak, what exactly is it? And second, how could Tobak, an intelligent and conscientious critic, so misinterpret an argument that is so plainly stated in the text? The most interesting feature of these two questions, which anyone familiar with Fish's work will recognize, is that both are ultimately the same question.

The main point of Fish's essays in *Is There a Text in this Class?* is that The Meaning of a text (or utterance, or sentence) is not a fixed entity that can be captured or communicated in any form that is so stable and universal that it will always mean the same thing to everyone, everywhere, forever. The meaning of a given text emerges only after it has been filtered through a specific situation and received by a reader who is embedded in that situation. Because language is always situational, it is a mistake to think that an utterance or text has the ability to transcend its situation to capture some greater universal and unchanging message that is tied, as with a golden cord, to the absolute. Language after all is a series of grunts, marks, and utterances, and to think that these can capture or transparently represent the underlying substrate of reality is akin to believing that you can catch a

moonbeam in your hand. It would be fantastic if language provided a crystalline window through which we could peer into the absolute depths, beholding truths so perfectly stable as to be everywhere and forever undeniable. As it is, though, our grunts and ink-marked pages are unequipped for such romantic ambitions. The best we can expect is for language to communicate objective meanings that are true not according to some accurate representation of the fabric of nature, but according to the rules that define situations, communities, or contexts in which we find ourselves embedded. Since we humans are creatures of context we can never "crawl out of our skins" to view the world from some context-independent view from nowhere that can be captured and communicated with sentences. Because this view is impossible for humans to achieve, it shouldn't trouble us too much to recognize that our words and truths are also situational. There is still such a thing as objective truth, but it is objective according to a shared and publicly acknowledged set of rules, not according to some transcendental set of universal rules that are unavailable to us anyway.

While Fish's argument is an attempt to explain how the meaning of a text can be unstable—rather than fixed and universally objective—he is careful not to slip into the Derridean position (that commonly attributed to Derrida, at least) that because meaning only comes into existence when there is a reader, the reader is free to create any meaning he chooses, and so a text doesn't really mean anything at all in itself. For Fish, context restrains the hyper-subjectivity of texts by limiting acceptable meanings to those that are appropriate to the situation. Texts mean different things at different times, but that doesn't mean any text can mean anything at any time. Within a specific time and place and community, the meaning of a text is fixed. Because humans always exist within a specific time and place and community, the objective meaning of a text is always there and readily available to us. It is only when we use the word "objective" to mean something like "universal" or "irrevocable" or "forever" that we get into trouble. When situations change, so do the meanings we are able to derive from words and texts. What makes a poem a poem is not something "in the text" that is scientifically identifiable for all to see if they will only look closely enough. What makes a poem a poem is the set of interpretive assumptions that are present when a reader encounters it—assumptions like "this piece of text is a poem."

Because language is always situational, no instance of language (like a poem) can transcend all situations to deliver its one true meaning unspoiled and intact. To get at the objective, independent meaning of a text, one would have to escape all situations and look at the text from a pristine, un-situated vantage point. This is impossible because, as Fish is fond of saying, "we're never not in a situation." (Fish, p.276) Language is always embedded in a situation, and so are we. Because it is strictly contextual, language can get no grip on the absolute structure of reality—or what Kant called the "thing in itself." According to Kant's model, all perceptions must filter through a set of fixed mental categories before we are able to "see" them. Even though we might at all times be surrounded by ghosts or square triangles, we would be unable to see these if we lacked a mental category to fit our sensory perceptions of ghosts and square triangles into. For Fish, it is the context that constrains possible meanings where for Kant it was the mental categories. The situational context determines how any given sentence, text, or utterance is organized and interpreted, and defines the parameters that would render other interpretations inappropriate, wrong, or simply invisible.

The situation (not the individual) provides parameters for what counts as a meaningful exchange, what mechanisms are valid to establish facts, what constitutes proof, and so on. That means that readers are, contrary to Tobak's description, never "hegemonic" or free to "exude waves of meaning onto all the otherwise meaningless objects they encounter." The meaning is already determined by non-textual, situational factors that contribute to how a reader receives the message—factors that include time, place, point of view, clues gathered from our surroundings, and so on.

When Tobak questions how a child can learn the interpretive rules of his or her community if that child hasn't yet learned to speak the language, Fish would likely respond that learning language and learning interpretive rules are one and the same thing. To learn to communicate linguistically is to learn how to recognize contextual clues, so the tension Tobak identifies between learning the language and learning the community's rules of interpretation does not really exist. When a child learns to speak a language, one of the things she has learned to do is master how language and context work together, which they always do. If Fish doesn't come out and say this, it is because he doesn't really have to. Neither Fish nor any other critic is obliged to provide an account of

how we acquire language before he is permitted to make an observation about how language works or what people do with it.

To conclude, by rejecting Fish's argument casting doubt upon the universal objectivity of texts, Tobak is *de facto* affirming the position that texts are fixed, stable, and their meanings universal and intelligible. If that position were accurate and the meanings of texts fixed and stable, then it would have been impossible for Tobak to misread Fish's argument so dramatically. Fish's position predicts that when individuals approach a text, they will do so through a certain set of values and prejudices they carry with them as members of a certain community with a certain outlook. If one approaches Fish's text from a position that assumes in advance, that Fish is wrong, or that the location of meaning really is "in the text," or that these post-modern nihilists are destroying our country, then one's mind will already be made up and any countervailing evidence will, like Kant's square triangles, simply not register. Tobak's misreading of the text is instructive in this regard because it accords so precisely with the thesis Fish advances—that what you see in a text is the product not of a fixed underlying reality the text captures, but of the contingent, contextual assumptions you bring to bear upon it.

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