The Spinozan Strain: Monistic Modernism and the Challenge of Immanence

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Abstract

*The Spinozan Strain* identifies a group of American modernist writers who use elements of Spinoza’s metaphysics, mediated by the writings of the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, as the basis for an aestheticized monism that explores what Spinoza’s thought makes possible affectively, socially, and politically, rather than philosophically. These monistic modernists use Spinoza and Emerson to disrupt a host of binary oppositions that were important sites of contest in modernist culture, such as life and death, time and eternity, and interiority and exteriority. They imagine these oppositions as derivative effects of a single, self-differentiating force that they portray alternately as an inorganic vitality, a structure of interlinked causes, or a universal blur. In its anti-binarism, monistic modernism offers a middle path between object-oriented and subject-centric or psychological accounts of the modernist movement. The first chapter of this project examines Djuna Barnes’s and Wallace Stevens’s recasting of life and death in terms of flows of affect, by which they articulate a mode of subjectivity that challenges the distinctions between performance and reality, activity and passivity. The second chapter argues that Thornton Wilder and William Carlos Williams advance a critique of progressive or teleological conceptions of time and history that depends on a vision of eternity as an emergent structure of interwoven temporalities, rather than a timeless transcendent state. The final chapter focuses on modern technology and speed, arguing that Hart Crane and Langston Hughes devise a Spinoza-like understanding of the body as a relation of speeds and slownesses in which the body and its surroundings blur together; this sense of corporeality allows them to examine the ways that speed becomes an ambivalent source of political power in modernity that demands—and makes possible—new strategies of political resistance.
For John Clarke (1939-1999)

—*sine qua non.*
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What is a scholar without debts? As a rule, many hands share in a work of many years and what follows is no exception. The tally of what I owe intellectually, emotionally, and materially to those who surrounded me these past few years is too lengthy to give in full, but there are several debts that cannot go unacknowledged. To my parents and my family, I owe the very possibility of this work, which would be unthinkable without them. Though the monasticism of academic life has often made me poor company, I am endlessly grateful for their love, support, and encouragement.

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Though I have more debts by far than these, I proceed hoping my readers know that whatever is good and sturdy in these pages I owe to the good company I shared over the last six years; whatever is not, I owe only to myself.
INTRODUCTION

"Writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers—painters too, even chance readers—may find that they are Spinozist; indeed, such a thing is more likely for them than for professional philosophers [...] a nonphilosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a ‘flash.' Then, it is as if one discovers that one is a Spinozist." – Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*

"No doubt it produced some confusion when Leibnitz, Spinoza, Kant, Göthe, Herder, Schleiermacher, Jean Paul, Jacobi, and the rest, sailed all at once into Boston Harbour, and discharged their freight. Here were crops which we had not grown; they might come in rotation, but as yet the old woods covered their germs." – John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*

I. Encountering Spinoza

In 1844, a young James Elliott Cabot dispatched an article that he hoped could be published in *The Dial*, the unofficial organ of the Transcendentalist movement in New England. The article’s subject was a philosopher whose name still rang with the insinuation of heresy, godlessness, immorality, and charlatanism. The article was addressed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, a dominant figure in one of the movement’s most visible factions, the co-founder and current editor of *The Dial*, and one of the most prominent men of letters in the United States. Unluckily for Cabot, the article arrived not long after the journal had become defunct. And yet, Ralph L.

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1 Deleuze 129.
2 Weiss 161.
3 An earlier article of Cabot’s, a study of Immanuel Kant, had already appeared in the April, 1844 edition of *The Dial*, which would turn out to be its last. Cabot went on to have a long and consequential relationship with Emerson, serving as his literary executor after his death in 1882 and authoring one of the first major biographies of Emerson in 1887. For a more detailed look at their relationship, see Nancy C. Simmons’s “Arranging the Sibylline Leaves: James Elliot Cabot’s Work as Emerson’s Literary Executor.”
4 For an account of the various factions and internal fissures of the Transcendentalist movement, see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism*. Gura’s text is a useful corrective to the tendency to conflate Emerson and his circle with Transcendentalism as such, to the exclusion or minimization of figures like Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, and Theodore Parker.
Rusk tells us in the introduction to his edition of Emerson’s correspondence that this article, though its audience numbered only a single person, did not go amiss: “Emerson read the tardy paper three or four times and still had by no means exhausted its interest. He thought, when he had finished, that whatever he himself might write would be a plagiarism from it” (lvi). For the writer whose fame rested, in part, on the doctrine of self-reliance, the shock of this affinity must have been severe. In a fascinating historical symmetry, decades later, in 1881, the year before Emerson’s death, Friedrich Nietzsche, an ardent admirer of Emerson’s self-reliant ethos of rejecting slavish imitations of past models and, by many readings, a herald of the modernist period, announced a similar shock on first encountering the ideas of this philosopher: “I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a precursor, and what a precursor!” (“Postcard to Overbeck” 92, emphasis in the original). The figure responsible for this paradoxical sense both of jolting novelty and familiar recognition, the subject of Cabot’s article and of Nietzsche’s reading, was not a radical philosopher of the nineteenth century, but the seventeenth-century Dutch rationalist Baruch Spinoza. I want to pause on this odd experience of recognition, this sense of anticipation, that is common to Emerson and Nietzsche, who are so often taken as figureheads of their respective periods. It is a vexation, a kind of déjà vu to find oneself anticipated—one has seen something already, but through another’s eyes. Nietzsche’s enchantment slips almost palpably into the suspicion or puzzlement of a happening not yet comprehended: “my lonesomeness, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is now at least a twosomeness. Strange” (92). For Emerson, this déjà vu is almost paralyzing—he cannot, must not, write, lest it come out a plagiarism. Plagiarism would have no risk, it would be no compulsion, if Emerson had not encountered a position of thought that he desired to occupy or inhabit himself. Why plagiarize
except to incorporate, to consume an idea? And yet, he realizes that to do so would mean appropriating and becoming reliant upon what he has read. He would commit precisely the error that he had warned against seven years earlier in “The American Scholar,” where he declares that he “had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system” (57). Emerson must pause to recollect and reorient himself, to take Spinoza not as a model, but as nourishment, a means and not an end, to remind himself that “[o]ne must be an inventor to read well” (59).

This dynamic is significant for my project. It bears directly on how Emerson uses Spinoza and, crucially, on the meaning and uses of Spinoza’s ideas among later modernist writers. When I write, as I will shortly, of a “Spinozan strain,” do I mean that Emerson “does” Spinozism? That he echoes, with intent, the ideas of his predecessor? Or merely that there are Emersonian analogues for certain Spinozan ideas that are nevertheless unconnected to them by any causal links? In a recent article, Michael W. Clune makes an incisive distinction between claims of anticipation and claims of influence: “Whereas a claim of influence necessitates carefully uncovering causal links between a literary work and [thinking that was shaped by it], a claim of anticipation requires merely demonstrating that a certain literary idea resembles a later […] idea” (1195).5 Anticipation is mere analogy or resemblance; influence demands a fabric of causal connections. When Emerson pauses from his writing so as not to parrot Cabot’s Spinoza, it is to prevent falling into this relation of anticipator-anticipant by which he could produce only reproductions, only late echoes of Spinoza; a project like this one could think of Emerson only as the Spinoza of Concord. This scenario would also impoverish Spinoza, rendering him a kind of

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5 Clune makes this distinction in the context of a critique of Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* and draws his example from Levine’s suggestion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry “anticipates” twentieth century social sciences (1195).
—not merely an end, but, in a sense, a dead end, a philosophy complete unto itself, without afterlife, whose dubious honour is to be rediscovered by future thinkers. Emerson’s pause, then, is the conversion of anticipation into influence—not the over-influence against which he warns in “The American Scholar” (which corresponds to what Clune terms anticipation), but an attempt to integrate Spinoza into his thought, to link him causally to a body of thinking that does not merely reproduce its sources but is transformed by, and transforms, them. My project attends to causal links—to genuine influence. To that end, it is necessary to resist understanding what I call “the Spinozan strain” in American modernism as a linear passing-on of Spinozism. Emerson does not absorb Spinoza’s thought in its entirety, as a system of concepts and propositions linked together by logical necessity; rather, he affirms only what appeals to him, what he has already begun to feel out for himself: the immanence of God to nature; the reconception of unitary, individual entities as configurations of affect or confluences of powers of action; the denial of free will; the sense of God as an endless, vital activity of causation, rather than a transcendent, personal being. This Spinozan-inflected Emersonianism often has more in common with the non-organicist vitalism of Gilles Deleuze than has commonly been recognized. Branka Arsić has described Emerson’s thought in terms that might as well come from Deleuze, though they ultimately derive from Emerson himself; for Arsić, Emerson’s primary emphasis is on the “ontological instability of [...] oceanic being” in which “nothing is but everything becomes” (5). And yet, if there are resonances between Emerson and Deleuze on this account, it is not because of any mystical relationship of anticipation, but because they shared an influence in Spinoza and because they transformed his thought in similar ways. In that respect, the aspects of Spinoza’s thinking that Emerson does not pick up are as significant as the ones that he does. Largely absent from the Spinozan strain are the qualities that earned Spinoza the respect of academic
philosophers, even those who otherwise found his conclusions monstrous or absurd: the “geometrical method” of the *Ethics*, which presented every claim in the manner of a Euclidean proof, his reverence for mathematics, his cool, detached rationalism, his strident claims on behalf of reason. These qualities tend to fall out of the Spinozan strain, so that its reception among modernist poets, novelists, and playwrights cannot help but bear the traces of Emerson’s handling. When Emerson picks up Spinoza, he leaves fingerprints.

II. Emerson and the Spinozan Strain

My project begins with two central claims about Spinoza and his relationship to Emerson and modernism. The first is that Emerson’s writings provide an important conduit for the transmission of Spinozan thought into American modernist literature and culture, albeit rarely in a straightforward way. Through Emerson, Spinoza influences the way that a group of modernist poets, novelists, and playwrights think about broad, philosophical issues and “big ideas” such as death, space, and time. I term this influence “the Spinozan strain,” by which I intend a number of related meanings. Firstly, the term suggests the complicated, often vexed nature of Spinoza’s influence, which often appears at sites of tension or pressure in a writer’s work, where a Spinozan impetus strains against other, contrary tendencies. My discussions of Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams, for instance, focus on the ways that the Spinozan influence in their works strains against a latent individualism or yearning for transcendence to produce troubled, deeply ambivalent notions of heroism (Crane’s pilot-hero in “Cape Hatteras,” or Williams’s artist-historian narrators throughout *In the American Grain*).

The second meaning I intend by “Spinozan strain” relies on a musical metaphor. A strain is a fragment or phrase of a larger melody that repeats throughout a piece, often alluding to or
standing in for the complete melodic line to which it belongs—the strain-melody relation is, in a sense, one of synecdoche. This metaphor captures the nature of the Spinozan influence among the modernists. In the literary works that I examine in this project, Spinoza’s thought is never present as a whole, a complete system, a philosophy as such, but only in parts and fragments, or in such characteristic gestures of thought as Djuna Barnes’s consistent use of a language of affect, or in Langston Hughes’s tendency to characterize the social body as a relation of speeds and slownesses, a rhythm. These modernists approach Spinozan ideas not as philosophers, but as writers. One of the underlying assumptions of this project is that it means something different to think literarily about philosophical problems than to think about them philosophically. Literature has value as thought, even if it lifts from philosophy only the strains, and not the whole melody, of a system like Spinoza’s. Clune makes a similar case. Writing against the assumptions of formalist criticism, he urges literary critics not to shrink from “the resource that has always interested people beyond our field: literary ideas” (1197). Formalism, he argues, reifies ideas in order to discover them as the encoded meanings of objective forms, a sleight of hand allows formalist critics to attribute the value of literary studies to its unique ability to read the effects of forms of all sorts (1196). In contrast, Clune insists that identifying and understanding literary ideas “requires us to suspend our projections and to be alert, hungry for new thoughts […] The discovery, assessment, and explication of these ideas represent the future of research in our field” (1198). My project contributes to this renewed attention to literary ideas by showing how Emerson and an array of American modernist writers adapt ideas furnished by Spinoza’s philosophy to rethink fundamentally the way their societies understood concepts like death, space, and time. But what distinguishes literary from philosophical ideas? Is thinking in one domain the same as thinking in another? Clearly not. I argue that while philosophical thinking
must be adequate to the test of logic and consistency, literary thinking aims only to be adequate to lived experience, to life; the latter can afford to be speculative in a way that even speculative philosophy, which proceeds nevertheless from certain principles, with a certain consistency, cannot. Confronted with the idea, say, that life cannot meaningfully be separated from death, that dying occurs with the same perpetuity and gradualness as life, literary thinking must imagine that idea as an experience that someone— anything— could live. It must imagine what the lived quality would be of such an idea being true, what affects it engenders in us, what other modes of living it makes possible or impossible. What would that idea mean for a living thing amidst other living things? The Spinozan thinking that Emerson and the modernists perform considers these questions; it does not seek to resolve or reintegrate its strains into the melody of Spinozism as a finite whole or closed system. These strains are fragments removed from the whole that completes them and reintroduced into flexible assemblages of ideas—the essay, the poem, the play, the novel—for which doctrinal consistency and the order of ideas matters less than the affects and vital possibilities that these assemblages produce. Thus, the Spinozan strain converses with Walt Whitman in Crane’s poetry, or with French Decadence in Barnes’s novel Nightwood.

To frame the Spinozan strain in this way, as an effect-oriented mode of literary thinking, is also to invite questions about how this approach to my subject matter differs from pragmatism, which is similarly non-systematic and oriented toward processes and their local effects. A

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6 In What is Philosophy? Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari classify thought in three ways, each according to its principal activity and objects: Philosophy creates new concepts and seeks consistency between them; science creates percepts or functions and seeks schema of reference; lastly, art produces affects and creates compositions of various sensations (197–98). I mark the distinction between the function of literature and that of philosophy in a similar way.

7 For the sake of clarity, by “Spinozan strain” I intend the specifically literary appropriations, adaptations, and deployments of Spinozan ideas, not Spinoza’s philosophy itself. It is accurate to characterize the Spinozan strain as non-systematic; it is not accurate to say the same of Spinozism proper.
number of important readings by Richard Poirier, Jonathan Levin, and Paul Grimstad have used pragmatism to articulate the relationship between Emerson’s work and American modernism.\(^8\)

Though my analysis of this relationship resonates with much of this pragmatist criticism, my approach is not pragmatist in an important respect. I emphasize what is metaphysical in Emerson and in modernism. Metaphysics deals principally with questions about the structure or foundations of being and with concepts such as cause and effect, time, and space.\(^9\) By contrast, pragmatism tends to cast metaphysical questions aside in favour of returning to what William James calls “[t]he earth of things” (*Pragmatism* 540). Pragmatism insists on asking what real difference it would make to accept a given proposition or to live with a given concept. In this sense, what I refer to as literary thinking (as opposed to the system-building philosophy that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century) is indeed pragmatic; however, it is not anti-metaphysical. It does not reduce metaphysical problems to their effects, but imagines a world restructured by, say, a Spinozan metaphysics of immanent causation, as I discuss in my chapter on eternity, and articulates the various consequences of that world. In other words, a Spinozan literary thinking does not discard metaphysics, but feels for it. Many of the figures I discuss do not share our contemporary skepticism of concepts like cause and effect or time and space. Though they disrupt traditional ways of viewing these categories, they do not allow us to imagine them as mere abstractions. Joseph Urbas makes this case about Emerson in his recent study *Emerson’s Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes*, an important corrective to recent

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\(^8\) See Poirier’s seminal work *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987), Levin’s *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (1999), and Grimstad’s recent *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (2013).

\(^9\) Many writers confuse metaphysics and ontology and there is often some ambiguity about the extent to which they overlap. Though both ask questions about the nature of being, metaphysics asks transcendental or structural questions (e.g., how do relations of cause and effect underlie or make being possible?), while ontology asks about the nature of the being that metaphysics structures (e.g., what does it mean to say that a thing exists, that it has being? What is that being like?).
efforts to discover a “de-Transcendentalized” Emerson (xxviii). Urbas argues that the core of Emerson’s thinking is not the roiling flux of experience, as most pragmatist and post-modernizing readings of him suggest, but the traditional metaphysical categories of cause and effect (xix). The most consistent aspect of his work, Urbas argues, is a belief that human beings are “part of a causal continuum leading up to the First Cause” in which they are “both cause and effect, with the precise demarcation difficult to determinate” (156). Though I explore somewhat different accounts of Emersonian causation in the chapters that follow, Urbas’s work clears a space for scholars to engage with Emerson as someone with a serious, albeit non-systematic, commitment to metaphysics, rather than a proto-pragmatist, and there is a striking consonance between Emerson’s understanding of causation and Spinoza’s. 10 But does recognizing Emerson’s abiding commitment to metaphysics mean conceding that he is merely a traditional thinker, an outmoded or antiquarian figure? For the writer who warns against the veneration of the past for its own sake in “History,” this would be a grim irony. But my project argues that while Emerson’s world-view is explicitly metaphysical, it is hardly conventional; I argue that he structures his metaphysics, as Spinoza does, around a logic of immanence that undercuts the search for a transcendent, unifying origin or ground that animates much traditional metaphysics. By my account, the fluctual or process-oriented elements of Emerson’s thinking are deeply integrated into his metaphysics—they do not supersede it but belong to it. If we see ourselves as being “beyond” metaphysics, Emerson is not our contemporary. 11 Approaching him this way

10 In taking Emerson metaphysically, Urbas and I dissent from the pragmatist reading on markedly different grounds than Stanley Cavell, who presents his idiosyncratic reading in a paper titled “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” Cavell argues that to see Emerson as a pragmatist forerunner, “[t]o repress Emerson’s difference[,] is to deny that America is as transcendentalist as it is pragmatist, that it is in struggle with itself, at a level not articulated by what we understand as the political” (223). However, while Cavell rejects the classification of Emerson as a pragmatist, he vehemently refuses to entertain a metaphysical Emerson (Urbas xxxvi, n40).

11 I do not take this “if” for granted. Though much of the critical and literary theory that gained prominence in literature departments in the 1980s and 1990s was metaphysically agnostic, such as New Historicism, or openly anti-metaphysical, such as deconstruction, a number of more recent provinces of theory, such as New Materialism and
allows us to grapple with Emerson just as he grappled with Spinoza: we can appreciate what he furnishes us in the present (and furnished the modernists in theirs), while resisting the urge to name him our direct contemporary and, in the process, to make of our moment an implicit telos or fulfilment of what we find valuable in him. The Spinozan strain gives us an opportunity to explore what we can understand as a disruptive affinity—of Spinoza with Emerson, of Emerson with the modernists, and of all three with ourselves—in which we see in earlier figures neither alien pasts nor perfect contemporaries, but a resource for thinking that is useful because it demands to be met with difference.

The third and final meaning that I invoke with “the Spinozan strain” derives from the biological metaphor. A biological strain, say, of a virus, is a genetic variation that affects organisms sharing a single line of descent. Though the genetic divergence of one viral strain from another may be significant, it does not yet constitute a difference of species. This is analogous to the relationship that I identify between the various modernists. My project groups writers who are seldom discussed alongside one another: Barnes, Delmore Schwartz, and Stevens, Crane and Hughes, Wilder and Williams. Each of my three chapters addresses a markedly different set of figures and expressions of Spinozan thought. Though they each chance upon Spinoza’s ideas under different circumstances and adapt to them in different ways, each group of writers performs a kind of thinking and conceptualization that belongs in the genealogy of Spinozan influence. The biological or viral metaphor behind the word “strain” is also appropriate to describing the nature of the encounter between Spinoza and the modernists. I have figured Emerson, in a sense, as the host or carrier of a strain that spreads, through contact with speculative realism, have self-consciously embraced the view that metaphysical categories are real (i.e., metaphysical realism).
him, among a group of American modernists who were especially sensitive or sympathetic to the Spinozan ideas that his writing reconfigured and made available (though, as I specify in the respective chapters, some writers, like Wilder and Barnes, also encountered Spinozan ideas through other means). Emerson is thus the site of a kind of relation that Spinoza calls *occursus*. Gilles Deleuze describes this *occursus* in relation to Spinozan affect in a 1978 lecture: “Literally this is the encounter. […] When I say ‘This one does not please me,’ that means, literally, that the effect of his body on mine, the effect of his soul on mine affects me disagreeably […] There is a noxious mixture or a good mixture, as much at the level of the body as at that of the soul” (“Spinoza: 24/01/1978”). The transmission of the Spinozan strain is always an *occursus* of this sort, an encounter that must be measured by the affects that it produces or fails to produce. Many thousands of writers have read Emerson and come away no more Spinozan than before, perhaps finding in that encounter that they mix only with another component of Emerson’s work. Many have missed the encounter or resisted it altogether, while some others, like Williams, contract the Spinozan strain, but suppress it into dormancy, until its effects emerge suddenly from the contradictions of an odd work such as *In the American Grain*. The range of encounters with the Spinozan strain, in other words, is quite diverse, and these specific circumstances often bear on the kind of effects that the encounters produce.

What justifies speaking of a Spinozan strain, though? That Emerson encountered and was deeply impressed by Cabot’s account of Spinoza in 1844 does not establish Spinoza’s importance to Emerson or to the intellectual *milieu* in which he lived. While I will treat specific strands of influence with more detail in the relevant chapters, I want briefly to address here the question of what Spinoza represented in Emerson’s time and, later, in the modernist period. Before the nineteenth century, Spinoza was widely interpreted as an atheist whose thought
represented the grotesque extremes to which philosophical naturalism would lead—namely, in a world no longer secured by a transcendent source of values, God would be dethroned by Nature itself. By the time Emerson was born in 1803, though, Spinoza had been reborn. In Europe, a new paradigm was emerging in which Spinoza was not an atheist, but an almost saintly figure, a pantheist who found God wherever he looked and for whom life itself was worship that required no church. It was this Spinoza who became a personal hero to Romantic luminaries like Goethe, who in turn became a hero of Emerson’s. And yet, it is crucial to note that this revitalized and Romanticized conception of Spinozism arrived in the United States at a lag. Many of the philosophical and theological sources that viewed Spinoza in this way were not translated and disseminated in New England until the late 1820s and early 1830s, which were formative years for Emerson (Ahlstrom 599-600).

It is not clear if Emerson ever read Spinoza's works directly. An 1843 issue of The Dial contains an article listing the contents of a library of books being brought to Boston from England by Amos Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane; listed in the library is a four-volume edition of Spinoza’s “Works and Epistles,” almost certainly in Latin, since Spinoza’s works had not yet been widely translated (“Catalogue of Books” 545-46). Though the library initially found a home at Fruitlands, the short-lived utopian commune Alcott established outside of Boston, it was eventually divided up among Alcott, Emerson, and Franklin Sanborn (Sanborn 38-39). Since Emerson had by this point taken over the editorship of The Dial from Fuller, and since he came into possession of at least several of these books, he was undoubtedly aware of the range of material included in the library. As a reader of Latin, he would also have been equipped to read the Spinoza volumes, though no information exists to suggest whether or not he actually did. As was the case with much of his philosophical learning, Emerson's contact with Spinoza appears to
have been largely second- or third-hand, from synoptic histories of philosophy, popular summaries, and through contemporaries, most of whom were inclined to view Spinoza either as a damnable atheist or a saintly mystic. David Greenham notes that there is “no evidence that Emerson had read Spinoza by 1838, but he would have come across a fairly clear picture of his main points in [Dugald] Stewart’s Dissertation [...] which he read in the early 1820s” (203). Another likely point of exposure is Charles Follen, a German immigrant and sometime Unitarian minister who had taken up the first professorship of German at Harvard University and who knew Emerson from the ministry. In 1830-31, Follen delivered a number of lectures on topics in moral philosophy, one of which was Spinoza’s ethics (Mehring 447). In 1836, Follen attended the gatherings of the so-called “Transcendental Club,” the coterie of intellectuals that Emerson frequented (Mehring xxxiv). As controversy raged in and around Boston over the pantheistic implications of Emerson’s 1838 address at Harvard Divinity School, Follen, who declined to declare himself for or against either side, delivered a course of lectures on the history of pantheism, again taking Spinoza as one of his principal topics of discussion (Follen 332). Though it is unlikely that Emerson attended these talks, given his desire not to stoke the controversy of his address, he likely knew of Follen’s thoughts on pantheism and of his previous lectures on Spinoza by reputation if not by attendance. Emerson could also have learned more

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12 In the late 1820s and throughout the 1830s, the New England Unitarian community to which Emerson and many of his contemporaries belonged was riven by increasingly heated debates about the nature of God. The major fault lines emerged around the question of miracles. There emerged a schism between the older, more conservative “Supernaturalist” faction, who believed that “Christ performed miracles because he was a special being endowed with special powers,” and the younger “Rationalist” faction, who accepted the general principles of Christianity, but saw the Gospel accounts of miraculous deeds as literary embellishments (Gura 99). Emerson’s 1838 address was a forceful expression of religious naturalism that went well beyond the Rationalist position, not only denying any conception of God as a being outside of the natural order, but positively identifying God with nature, as Spinoza had done in the Ethics. For more conservative Supernaturalist theologians like Andrews Norton, this was more than pantheism—it was rank atheism. The address instigated two years of ferocious debate between the two factions, from which Emerson was conspicuously absent, that demonstrated the full extent of the divisions that had grown in the Unitarian community in the 1830s (106-09).
directly about Spinoza’s philosophy through contemporaries such as Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, both of whom possessed the intellectual voraciousness, fondness for European philosophy, and linguistic skills to seek out and read Spinoza’s works in their originals. Parker first read Spinoza some time around 1835 and began attending meetings of Emerson’s circle not long thereafter (Weiss 73, 104-05).

At roughly the same time, Fuller turned from studying Jacobi, the German Idealist, to reading Spinoza, whose influence she suspected in Jacobi; as she read these works, she also discussed her reading with Parker (Braun 47-48). Within a few years, Fuller had become a close friend of Emerson’s and one of the brightest intellectual lights in Boston. In the memoir volume that Emerson, James F. Clarke, and William H. Channing prepared in honour of Fuller after her death, Emerson recalls the series of “conversations” or salons that Fuller organized for the women of Boston. In the winter of 1843-44, just before Emerson received Cabot’s article, Fuller presided over a discussion that included “episodes on War, Bonaparte, Goethe, and Spinoza” (350-51). While Emerson did not attend this particular conversation, he was known to sit in on Fuller’s salon from time to time. Since both Napoleon and Goethe were figures of fascination for Emerson (his 1850 volume *Representative Men* would include lectures on both men), it is plausible, even likely, that he would have discussed the topic of this particular conversation with Fuller. Between Follen, Parker, and Fuller, Emerson had no shortage of interlocutors with whom he could have discussed Spinoza’s philosophy and any number of proximate issues.

Emerson also read widely, if not deeply, in the works of Romantic and German Idealist thinkers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, all of whom wrestled extensively with the consequences of Spinoza’s philosophy. The German Idealists in particular were responsible for a
significant renaissance in Spinoza studies in the late eighteenth century. Emerson learned of their works not only in print, but also in conversations with fellow Transcendental Club members such as Frederic Henry Hedge and George Ripley, who translated much of the ground-breaking philosophy that had come out of Germany since Kant (Labriola 129; Selected Journals 1820-1842 370). During his time as editor of *The Dial*, Emerson oversaw the publication of numerous translations of German Idealist writing, such as Hedge's translation of Schelling's 1841 introductory lectures at the University of Berlin (Labriola 129). The Transcendental Club’s fondness for German Idealism could have provided Emerson with glimpses of the central tenets of Spinozism in the years before he encountered Cabot’s article. The Spinozan idea that God is an impersonal substance immanent to nature and that all things are causally interwoven is central to Emerson’s thinking, yet his ambivalence about taking other philosophers as models prevented him from championing any of the idealists too loudly. Ironically, it is perhaps this very tendency to keep himself at a respectable distance from the German Idealists and to rely on his own philosophical intuitions that resulted in Emerson turning toward Spinoza himself, deriving from him a theory of ethics as immanent power that was largely overshadowed in the writings of the German Idealists, who were more concerned with debating the consequences of Spinoza’s pantheism.

Another potential early source of contact between Emerson and Spinoza was Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo’s aunt and early mentor. Mary Moody’s conversations and correspondence with her nephew were frequent and often deeply philosophical, lighting on her

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13 Frederick Beiser’s *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* provides the account of record of the German Idealists’ engagement with Spinozism. See pp. 44-109.
14 See Joseph Urban’s *Emerson’s Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes* on the centrality of causation in Emerson’s philosophy. Similarly, Spinoza’s entire philosophical system is arguably structured around the concept of the immanent cause, which I discuss at some length in my second chapter.
recent thoughts and reading, which she also recorded in her diary; an 1834 entry records an imaginary conversation with Spinoza in which Mary Moody chastises him for his pantheistic vision of a “God whose all-embracing being contains in his sole substance, tho’ extension, spirit & matter” (qtd. in Cole 289). During the tumult that followed Emerson’s denial of supernatural miracles and of the personality of God in the Harvard Divinity School address, Ripley defended his friend against insinuations of atheism and Spinozism levelled by the conservative Unitarian divine Andrews Norton; however, he did so not directly, but by rebutting Norton’s conflation of Spinozism with atheism. As Greenham puts it, “Spinoza [became] a proxy for the author of the ‘Address,’” while Ripley’s defence of Spinoza against Norton “was, at the same time, a sub rosa defence of Emerson” (62-63). What this suggests, above all else, is that whatever one made of Spinoza at the time—demon or saint, atheist or pantheist—the invocation of his name was widely legible as a stand-in for Emerson’s. Though Mary Moody appreciated Emerson’s sentiments and knew them not to be atheistic, whatever else they were, in a letter to Emerson’s brother William she declares herself firmly on the side of Norton against Spinoza (and implicitly against Emerson) on the dangers of pantheism (Greenham 68). By 1838, then, Emerson had not likely read Spinoza’s words for himself, but had almost certainly read about them and discussed them in conversations, and had also heard his ideas repeatedly compared to Spinoza’s during the Address controversy. Throughout the turmoil of 1838, he was a Spinozan by compulsion, the identity thrust upon him by the declarations and coded letters of friends and enemies alike. In 1844, how could he have missed the humour of his circumstance when, at his first pen-fall after reading Cabot’s essay, he discovered it impossible to write in his own name?

Since Emerson knew something about who Spinoza was and what the basic elements of his philosophy were as early as the 1820s, it is difficult to periodize his work according to his
exposure to Spinoza. Cabot’s article does not appear to mark a dramatic shift in Emerson’s thinking, though *The Conduct of Life* (1860) is markedly more Spinozan, especially in works like “Fate” and “Power,” than *Nature* (1836), for instance. At the same time, there are distinct Spinozan resonances in works like “Spiritual Laws,” “History,” and “Circles,” all of which appeared in the first series of *Essays* (1841). Emerson’s reaction to Cabot’s article is not a break, but a moment of recognition, on Emerson’s part, that he has long been sounding the notes of the Spinozan strain. Though I acknowledge the broad shifts in the tenor of Emerson’s thinking from the early idealism of *Nature*, with its debts to Coleridge and Emmanuel Swedenborg, to the more anomalous explorations of an ontology of process, fluctuation, and power in “Experience” (1844, but written earlier) and *The Conduct of Life*, I typically follow Urbas in attending primarily to the long-term consistencies in Emerson’s thinking, drawing connections and noting differences wherever necessary between the Spinozan resonances in early and late works (155).

**III. Monistic Modernism**

My project’s second major claim is that Spinoza’s influence manifests itself as a specific and hitherto-unrecognized formation of American modernism that adopts elements of Spinoza’s thinking—his logic of transindividuality, his physics of affect, his understanding of God as the immanent structure of the world, rather than its transcendent creator—in order to rethink a series of large, consequential concepts that modern science and culture had begun to call into question: death, eternity, and motion. Each of my chapters shows how different groups of modernist writers engage with Spinozan ideas in ways that challenge the fundamental binary oppositions

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15 The primary sources for these influences on Emerson’s early work were, respectively, James Marsh’s introduction to the American edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, which caused a stir in New England when it was published in 1829, and Sampson Reed’s *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, which helped to popularize Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences in the United States (Gura 50-53, 60-63).
that habitually structure modern thinking about these concepts. Thus, Barnes, Schwartz, and Stevens refuse the opposition of life and death, and instead strain toward a morbid vitalism, a conception of death as integral to, and inseparable from, Life itself; likewise, Crane and Hughes conceive of speed, motion, and the body in a way that collapses or “blurs” the reference-points of here and there, the object and its *milieu*; lastly, Wilder and Williams break from the long tradition of rendering time and eternity as opposites and instead turn to conceptions of eternity (or history) that incorporate time, that are, in fact, only the immanent structures of temporality itself. I term these Spinoza-inflected formations “monistic modernism” because its animating feature, I argue, is a relentless monism: a view that understands all apparently fundamental oppositions as deriving from a single dynamic, self-differentiating term. Yet this in itself does not distinguish monistic modernism from its alternatives. In his important essay “Toward a Definition of American Modernism,” Daniel Singal claims that the basis of modernist culture was its “integrative mode” of dealing with experience, “a passion not only for opening the self to new levels of experience, but also for fusing together disparate elements of that experience into new and original ‘wholes’” (12). At the same time, the modernists recognized that integration could not be held up as a final objective for art, but only as an ongoing, necessarily incomplete process, since “complete integration [would not] really be desirable, for that would mean stasis. The coalescing of the varied fragments of our contemporary existence can never be consummated, but must constantly be sought” (Singal 14).

The specificity of monistic modernism is that it implicitly rejects the idea that complete integration entails stasis; on the contrary, it attempts to think difference and various processes of differentiation as presuming a complex, ongoing integration of all things. If it is impossible to coalesce these fragments into a whole, as Singal suggests, it is only because there is nothing to
consummate—there are no wider circles to draw, no unities to construct, because difference and
fragmentation are themselves integral parts of an absolutely integrated world. It is essential to
note, though, that monistic modernism does not understand this integration as a coalescing of
contraries into a harmonious totality—there is no true whole, in the sense of an overarching unity
that subsumes its parts, but only what Deleuze, borrowing from the medieval theologian Duns
Scotus, calls the “univocity of Being”: the idea that there is only one kind or level of being, that
there is no “outside,” there are no “other” things (Smith, “Univocity” 28-29).16 In this sense,
monistic modernism is a radical refusal of the whole-fragment dichotomy, even in the attenuated
form that imagines the whole as a limit, an object to be sought constantly and never achieved.
Spinozan monism, then, must not be interpreted too literally as a philosophy of all-subsuming
unity. It differs from the Neoplatonic position that sees diversity and difference as unreal or
secondary to the real unity of all things in “the One.” Though several influential accounts of
Spinoza have seen this complete, static, all-subsuming unity as the key to his philosophy (chief
among them being Hegel’s “acosmist” reading),17 I rely on an alternative stream of
interpretations, such as Deleuze’s, that understand Spinoza’s God or substance as an immanent
vital process or an activity of self-differencing, not something static; furthermore, I argue that
similar interpretations were already present in American modernist texts because they had been
made available to modernist writers by way of the Spinozan strain that Emerson manifested.

Over the past two decades, this dynamic version of Spinoza has become an important
reference point in political, social, and ecological theory, especially among thinkers working

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16 Though Deleuze borrows the term from the medieval theologian Duns Scotus, he uses it to describe the
fundamental principle of Spinoza’s ontology. See Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza.
17 See Yitzhak Melamed’s refutation of this “acosmist” reading in Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought
66-82.
within the frameworks of vitalist and new materialisms. This Spinoza figures prominently in the work of scholars like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Brian Massumi, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett. This rediscovery was spurred in large part by process-oriented interpretations of Spinoza that emerged from certain quarters of French philosophy from the 1960s onward, in the work of Deleuze, Negri, and the Althusserian Marxists Pierre Macherey and Étienne Balibar.18 Though Deleuze’s innovations inform my interpretations of Spinoza, I try to demonstrate wherever possible that the expression of the Spinozian strain in Emerson directs us in a literary way toward the kind of thinking that Deleuze, the new materialists, and others would later articulate in more explicit, philosophical terms. I use Deleuze and other contemporary Spinoza interpreters to frame what I believe is already legible in the creative, non-philosophical uses that Emerson and the modernists who follow him make of Spinoza’s ideas. By my reading, Spinoza allows the modernists to perform what Deleuze and Félix Guattari term “the magic formula […] “PLURALISM=MONISM” (A Thousand Plateaus 20).19

This formula entails something more fundamental and extensive than Singal’s integrative mode. Monistic modernism affirms that there are no other things and there is no other world—there is only here. It takes a broadly deterministic view of causality and is suspicious of free will; likewise, it often treats unitary formations of subjectivity such as the individual or the personality as convenient illusions masking what is really a shifting confluence of affects or capacities of feeling. It performs a radically immanentist view of the universe in which all distinctions must be accounted for by some mechanism or process belonging to a common world. The most pervasive

18 Deleuze’s two studies of Spinoza, Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza (1968) and Spinoza: Practical Philosophy (1970), as well as Negri’s The Savage Anomaly (1981), Macherey’s Hegel or Spinoza (1977) and Balibar’s Spinoza and Politics (1985) are landmark interpretations that helped to secure Spinoza’s reputation as a radically contemporary figure.
19 Much of the most trenchant Spinoza scholarship argues the validity of just such a formula (though finding it rather more logical than magical) for describing Spinoza’s monism. See Melamed, 61-86.
consequence of these assumptions is that monistic modernism refuses the distinction between order and disorder, structure and chaos. It implies a process philosophy akin to that which provocative thinkers like Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead articulated throughout the modernist period; all relation and all difference are effects of the emergent structure of being. Thus, monistic modernism entails a conception of existence as an inorganic, impersonal vitality, a non-totalizing totality, an open whole that does not subsume its parts, but structures, and is structured by, the relations that comprise it. For monistic modernism, structure is not transcendent or separate from what it structures. It is closer to what Deleuze describes as “absolute immanence” or “a life”: “Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject […] Immanence [that] is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things” (“Immanence: A Life” 26-27). It is a restless, unlimited, self-differencing whole that expresses its vitality through the infinite finite things it produces within itself.

Pluralist monism, affect, vitalism, absolute immanence, a renewed conception of structure: these are the effects of the Spinozan strain and the orientations that monistic modernism strives to articulate and express aesthetically.

But why Spinoza and modernism? What rescues this conjunction between disparate nouns from absurdity? That Emerson reworks and conveys Spinozan ideas cannot alone justify this attention, or else we could speak as justly, if more cumbersomely, of a Swedenborgian or a

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20 Spinoza describes this relation in a dialogue from an early work, *A Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, in which Reason declares to Desire that “Your assertion, then, is that the cause (since it is the Originator of the effects) must therefore be outside these. But you say this because you only know of the transeunt and not of the immanent cause, which by no means produces anything outside itself […] God is both an Immanent Cause with reference to his works or creatures, and also a whole” (47, emphasis in the original). Though Spinoza uses the theological language of God and creation here, he equates God with nature and creation with the perpetual, ongoing vitality of being, rather than with a grand, Biblical gesture of Creation.
Coleridgean strain. One of the points that my project seeks to make is that there was a genuine rhetorical occasion in the early twentieth century for writers to explore ideas with a Spinozan pedigree. I have alluded already to the shock of affinity that Emerson and Nietzsche felt toward Spinoza—an uncanny feeling of discovering a predecessor’s footprints on the rough ground ahead, where one imagined oneself a trailblazer. That shock involves the paradoxical discovery of the new in the old, the foregone, the precedent. Literary modernism was in many ways shaped by this paradox. One of the prevailing characteristics of modernist writing is a self-conscious desire to account for its own specificity, namely, a pervasive interest in understanding what actually constituted the novelty of the modern. What co-ordination of social, cultural, and political forces made it possible to think of oneself, or of one’s aesthetic expressions, in this way? As Michael North has recently argued, such questions were always haunted by the paradox that the need to examine the conditions that make novelty possible implies that “the range of available models of novelty had already been circumscribed by history” (10). To move forward, one had to look backward. The struggle to do both at the same time, at various scales (historical, personal, civilizational), motivated a wide range of canonical modernist writing by T. S. Eliot (“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” The Waste Land), Virginia Woolf (To the Lighthouse), William Faulkner (The Sound and the Fury), and Hughes (“The Negro Sings of Rivers”), to name a few. The trope of looking backward to move forward is as appropriate to much of the recent field-defining work in modernist studies as it was to the modernists themselves and informs many of the efforts of scholars associated with the New Modernist Studies such as Susan Stanford Friedman, Eric Hayot, Douglas Mao, and Rebecca Walkowitz to articulate planetary, transnational, plural, translated, and cosmopolitan modernisms.21 Many of the works that inform

the recent efforts to expand the genealogy of modernism backward to include Decadence and the *fin de siècle* have relied on this trope more or less explicitly, from Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) to Kristin Mahoney’s *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015). When Emerson and Nietzsche register the shock of their encounters with Spinoza, they mark an experience that would become figurative of modernism and the many efforts to account for its specificity. Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, we may say of these two that they were men who stood in symbolic relations to their age.22

The timeliness of a discussion of Spinoza’s relationship to modernism rests on more than these rhetorical resonances, though. There was a genuine renaissance of English-language Spinoza scholarship during the *fin de siècle* that stretched on into the modernist period, though the ground had been set for this explosion of interest throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as my discussion of Fuller’s interest in and Ripley’s defence of Spinoza indicates. In the late eighteenth century in Germany, a raging debate about Spinoza’s religious beliefs, known as the *Pantheismusstreit* (or “pantheism controversy”), produced a strikingly different conception of the philosopher than had prevailed in earlier years. Spinoza the atheist changed clothes and doctrines, and came instead to be regarded, in Novalis’s famous phrase, as a “God-intoxicated man” (Moreau 419-421). The *Pantheismusstreit* and its revision of Spinoza influenced a number of figures associated with the *Westminster Review* in the 1850s, including the novelist George Eliot, who edited the *Review* for several years and composed the first English-language translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* (though it remained unpublished), the

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22 Wilde’s famous declaration comes from *De Profundis*: “I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age” (594). The text, an extended letter addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas and written during Wilde’s time in prison, references Emerson by name and alludes several times to Spinoza.
philosopher George Henry Lewes, and the historian-novelist James Anthony Froude, both of whom published influential synopses of Spinoza’s philosophy in the *Review*’s pages. In the 1860s, Matthew Arnold further published a series of articles on Spinoza’s Biblical criticism in *Macmillan’s Magazine* and elsewhere that argued against understanding Spinoza as an atheist, a reading that was still prevalent in the English-speaking world; on the contrary, Arnold portrays him as an almost holy figure animated by an earnest, if heterodox, belief in God (Boucher 26-27). The public perception of Spinoza had so shifted by 1868 that Emerson could write in his journal that “[i]n my youth, Spinoza was a hobgoblin: now he is a saint” (*Emerson in His Journals* 549).

It was against this background that the more extensive and formal Spinoza scholarship of the 1880s began. Frederick Pollock’s *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (1880) and James Martineau’s *A Study of Spinoza* (1882) provided accounts of the philosopher’s system that were unprecedented (at least in English) in their extensiveness and rigour, and R. W. Elwes’s two-volume collection of his translations of the key texts (1883-84) set the standard for Spinoza translations into English. The growing interest in Spinoza was also reflected in the number of public intellectuals and philosophers who paid him tribute or acknowledged him as a progenitor. These included George Santayana, who wrote an admiring introduction to Andrew Boyle’s translation of the *Ethics* and the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* (1910), Samuel Alexander, who delivered a major lecture in 1921 on “Spinoza and Time,” and C. S.

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23 Wayne Boucher documents these works in *Spinoza in English: A Bibliography from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. See pp. 4, 112, and 181, respectively, on Eliot, Froude, and Lewes. Emerson had met Froude in 1848 and maintained a lifelong respect for him, as he declared in his address at an 1872 dinner held in Froude’s honour (“Address at the James Anthony Froude Dinner” 18-19). Furthermore, Emerson’s journals attest that he was a reader of the *Westminster Review* from at least 1837 and thus may have read the negotiations of Spinoza’s legacy in the *Review*’s pages in the 1850s (*Selected Journals 1820-1842* 503).

24 Elwes’s edition would remain standard until Edwin Curley’s and Samuel Shirley’s translations in the 1980s, though they are still widely available.
Peirce, one of the architects of American pragmatism, who regarded Spinoza as a “pragmaticist” avant la lettre and forerunner of his own philosophical accomplishments (Dea, *Peirce and Spinoza’s Surprising Pragmaticism* 204). John Dewey’s 1882 article “The Pantheism of Spinoza,” though rather ambivalent toward its subject, speaks to the growing academic interest in Spinoza in the United States. In his history of modern American philosophy, Bruce Kuklick points to “a new fashion for Spinoza” at the beginning of the twentieth century as a significant influence on Dewey’s naturalism, which sought to understand the development of culture in terms of immanent social factors, rather than the abstract progress of infinite thought (190).

Henri Bergson, a widely influential figure in the modernist period, frames his innovations in *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Creative Evolution* (1907) as improvements on Spinoza’s overly rigid, timeless conception of the universe, while Alfred North Whitehead acknowledges Spinoza as an influence and inspiration for aspects of his theory of the event in *Science and the Modern World* (1925). Albert Einstein famously regarded Spinoza as a personal hero and affirmed himself a believer in his impersonal, immanent conception of God, which he saw as being consistent with the deterministic universe that emerged from modern physics and his own innovations in the theory of relativity (Holton 31-32).

But Spinoza was not an obscure figure known mainly to philosophers and scientists. His stature was such that Crane could brag, in a 1931 letter to Solomon Grunberg, that he had been reading “Spinoza (Einstein’s grandpop) [, who] furnishes plenty of discipline” (*O My Land, My Friends* 442). It is noteworthy that Crane associates Spinoza with discipline (and thus with

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25 Shannon Dea’s work has done much to reveal the complex and multifarious levels of connection between Spinoza and Peirce, in particular, and Spinoza and the American pragmatists more broadly. Besides her dissertation, *Peirce and Spinoza’s Surprising Pragmaticism*, see her essays “Firstness, Evolution, and the Absolute in Peirce’s Spinoza” and “A House at War Against Itself: Absolute Versus Pluralistic Idealism in Spinoza, Peirce, James, and Royce.”
structure, since it is likely the “geometrical” structure of the *Ethics* that he has in mind), but also with Einstein, whom literary writers often grouped with Bergson and Whitehead as a prophet of process and flux (Steinman 57-58). Spinoza is a figure of discipline and the rigidity of structure, but also the ancestor of a man whose science was widely thought to have erased the rigid lines between things. In truth, Crane was recognizing a fact that Viscount Haldane noted in his afterword to Alexander’s lecture: “Spinozism gets a fresh significance in the new atmosphere of Relativity” (11). Allusions to Spinoza’s work or popular reputation also appear in the margins of the works and correspondence of writers like Barnes, Wilder, Stevens, and Schwartz, often in contexts that suggest the discipline that Crane attaches to him; however, the odd dichotomy in Crane’s description gives us a glimmer of a sensibility that I argue many of these writers’ works were already exploring—a sensibility that thinks structure through flux, discipline or order through seemingly disorderly processes. Crane’s comment briefly encapsulates the non-totalizing or dynamic conception of structure that I argue runs throughout monistic modernism. His description exemplifies the ways that Spinoza’s influence functioned as a site of tension or conflict between apparently contrary terms, even when the writers who were subject to this influence were not aware of their debt to it. Wherever Spinoza was, so too was there a monistic urge striving against one of the conceptual oppositions structuring modern (and modernist) thought; wherever the Spinozan strain was latent, a monistic modernism was manifest.

Each of my project’s three chapters examines a different encounter or *occurrus* between modernism and the Spinozan strain for which Emerson’s writings are the primary site. Emerson thus functions as the branching path leading toward three different, and sometimes incommensurate, irruptions of Spinozan monism in the modernist period. In each chapter, I begin by identifying a dichotomy (life and death, time and eternity, here and there) that structures
fundamental metaphysical concepts that the modernist period placed under new scrutiny. Secondly, I show how Emerson (and his contemporaries, in some cases) recasts these concepts in monistic, non-binary terms that show the influence of Spinoza’s immanentism, his insistence that all contraries must be explained as effects of a single self-organizing, self-differing generative principle. I attend not only to the ways that Emerson’s immanentism resembles Spinoza’s, but also to the ways that it subjects Spinoza’s concepts to creative distortions that offer new aesthetic possibilities for the modernists. Finally, I explore what the modernists themselves do with these possibilities, how they express in their own works an immanentism that responds to the various aesthetic, ethical, and political dilemmas and cruxes of the modernist period. Each chapter identifies a determinate mode of thinking—“morbid vitalism,” “dynamic eternalism,” and “mo(der)nism”—through which monistic modernism expresses itself.

Though I am primarily interested in the immanentism that the modernists derive from Emerson, the fact that these derivations were seldom straightforward cases of direct transmission allows me to explore Emerson’s ambivalent status among the modernists as an excessively genteel or complacent thinker who could not be embraced without qualification, but whose influence was so significant that it could not be rejected outright. I suggest that the modernist grappling with these ambivalences was also a working-out of the consequences of the immanentism in their own writings. Occasionally, I refer to writers who either appear to reject Emerson (Wilder) or do not take him as an influence (Barnes). In these cases, I show that these writers were nevertheless engaged in an ongoing immanentist revision of prevailing cultural attitudes that Emerson, too, had attempted to revise in the previous century.

My first chapter, “Morbid Vitalism: Immanence, Decadence, and Life in Modernist Death Writing,” deals with the binary opposition between life and death, and with the
oppositional affective responses that prevailed in high and popular culture in the modernist period. I argue that modernist writers like Djuna Barnes, Delmore Schwartz, and Wallace Stevens develop a monistic conception of life and death in their writings that dissolves this binary opposition and confronts the affective problems that arise from conceiving of life and death as a single, inseparable process. Through a discussion of Barnes’s novel *Nightwood* and poems by Schwartz (“Summer Knowledge”) and Stevens (“To an Old Philosopher in Rome”), I identify a mode of immanentist thinking about death and life that I term “morbid vitalism,” which I claim poses a direct challenge to tendencies that were prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century and that tended to see modern existence either fearfully, as infused by death, trauma, and suffering, or hopefully, as promising some kind of technological, medical, or scientific delivery from the perpetual threat of death. I draw upon Deleuze’s Spinozan conception of Life (as opposed to lower-case “life”) as a plane of immanence, immanent to nothing but itself, constituted only in an infinite process of self-difference, in order to argue that Spinoza and Emerson are necessary precedents for the modernist articulation of a morbid vitalism that strives for a kind of joyful hopelessness and refuses to commit to one side or another of the affective trap of hope and fear, optimism and pessimism.

In chapter two, “Sub Specie Aeternitatis: Dynamic Eternities in American Modernism,” I discuss the binary opposition between time and eternity, or, as it was often figured in the modernist period, time and timelessness. I locate versions of what I term “dynamic eternalism” in Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town* and William Carlos Williams’s idiosyncratic history of the United States, *In the American Grain*. I read these texts through Vittorio Morfino’s work on Spinoza and time in order to argue that they refuse to think of eternity (or history, in Williams’s case) as the transcendence of time, or as being in any way external to it, and instead regard
eternity as time’s open structure, an immanent cause that has no determinate being except in the
temporalities that constitute it. In this way, they struggle (with various degrees of success)
against the prevailing conceptions of time as being either static, teleological, or inherently
progressive and tending toward improvement. Wilder utilizes this non-progressve, yet dynamic,
sense of eternity as a model for a non-totalizing conception of community that does not subsume
its constituent members into a unified whole but understands the whole and its parts as being
reciprocally constitutive. Williams’s history engages in a more troubled way with dynamic
eternalism by dramatizing a conflict between a mastering or teleological approach to time and an
immanentist alternative. Williams’s text stages the contradiction between his narrators’ desires to
reconfigure the structure of time through the act of narration and the text’s own structure, which
intrudes at key moments to perform a kind of immanent critique of the narrators’ teleological
pretensions of intervening meaningfully in history on an individual or socially atomistic basis.

Finally, in my third chapter, “‘Speeds and Slownesses’: Machinic Mo(der)nism and the
Blur of Speed,” I discuss modernism’s fascination with speed technologies and the experience of
velocity, and the effects of the rapidly changing metaphysical (and physical) understanding of
space on modernist aesthetics. The binary opposition at play here is one that in previous
centuries had been taken for granted, but which modern science had cast into doubt: the
opposition of “here” and “there,” this and that space, the subject and its milieu. I argue that
Spinoza’s metaphysics were uniquely suited to being taken up by nineteenth century writers like
Emerson and Whitman as the Industrial Revolution hit its stride and technologies such as
electricity, locomotives, and the telegraph began to suggest new ways of thinking about the
nature of bodies in space. Spinoza offered a conception of bodies not as solid, unified objects,
but as a specific relation of speeds and slownesses, motion and rest. I show how Hart Crane’s
The Bridge and Langston Hughes’s Montage of a Dream Deferred, two cycles of poetry that otherwise have little to do with one another, share an interest in expanding upon the aesthetic and conceptual uses that Emerson and Whitman make of speed and modern machinery. I use Deleuze and Guattari’s discussions of Spinozan corporeality and Paul Virilio’s theorization of “dromology,” the study of the power dynamics of speed, to argue that Spinoza’s philosophy informs this strain of American modernism’s understanding of the body not as a mass of atoms, but as a blur in space-time, not as a discrete entity, but as a relatively indistinct blending with its spatial milieu. In this analysis, speed emerges in Crane and Hughes as a kind of monistic force, revealing that what appears to be a hard boundary between the body and its surroundings is actually rather vague, a matter not of independent entities in space, but of a single constitutive power shaping itself into myriads of interpenetrated forms. I develop the self-consciously unwieldy term “mo(der)nism” to describe the manifestation of the Spinozan strain that attempts to articulate the political implications of this conception of speed and the body, either for personal liberation (Crane) or resistance to racial oppression and stratification (Hughes).

It is by tracing these unlikely literary encounters with death, eternity, and speed, that I discern a modernism that, like so many others, looks backward to move forward; and yet, it looks backward upon ground that is familiar, but strange. Walking on this ground behind is Emerson, accompanied, as if in a Victorian spirit photograph, by Spinoza’s shadow. My project asks what changes about American modernism, what problems and opportunities arise, when we insist on keeping this diaphanous figure in our focus. I doubt very much that Spinoza, were he restored to life, would recognize the likeness of his philosophy in the writing of Barnes, or Wilder, or Hughes, or Crane. Perhaps he would reject the resemblance between himself and Emerson as well—but forebears do not decide the trajectories of their influence. The Spinozan
strain does not pass like the baton in a relay, handed off from runner to runner; rather, it brings together writers and thinkers who sometimes have little else in common but the ground of their Spinozan encounter. Until we examine that ground, the Spinozan element common to Barnes and Stevens, Crane and Hughes, Wilder and Williams, remains largely obscured. In a passage that supplies one of this introduction’s epigraphs, Deleuze muses on something akin to a Spinozan strain: "Writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers—painters too, even chance readers—may find that they are Spinozist; indeed, such a thing is more likely for them than for professional philosophers […] a nonphilosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a ‘flash.’ Then, it is as if one discovers that one is a Spinozist." (Spinoza: Practical Philosophy 129).26 I imagine Deleuze’s illumination somewhat differently. It is not a flash, but an exposure. It is photographic. In a novel, a poem, a play, there has been an instant—a turn of phrase, a felicitous allusion, an arresting image—that compels our attention. The work has exposed us—exposed itself—to something else; there is a presence in the work. Perhaps we look back upon the work as a single image and notice that it is a composition of textures, a contrast of differences and similarities, foreground and background. Transposed somewhere, perhaps unnoticed at first glance, is some captive motion seized as if by double exposure, a textural distortion in the shape of Spinoza, imposed on strange ground, transported fore and aft, modern and alien, present in spite of absence. What history placed this figure here and what does he invite? To these questions and their consequences, I address the following chapters.

26 In the chapters that follow, I use the adjective “Spinozan” to refer to resonances of Spinoza’s ideas that are non-systematic, indirect, or accidental. I reserve the term “Spinozist” to refer to explicit and systematic engagements with Spinoza’s philosophy. While I draw on the writings of Spinozist philosophers such as Deleuze, for instance, I characterize most of the literary figures in this project as Spinozan.
CHAPTER 1: MORBID VITALISM: MODERNIST DEATH WRITING

"When I am dead, compassionate hands will throw me over the railing; my tomb will be the unfathomable air, my body will sink for ages, and will decay and dissolve in the wind engendered by my fall, which shall be infinite." - Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"27

"A free man [sic] thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death." - Baruch Spinoza, Ethics IV.P69

I. The Unruly Part of Living: Dying As a Life-Style

In the first half of the twentieth century, Anglo-American high modernism took its most recognizable shape by reflecting what appeared to be a deep pessimism, a broad cultural malaise, about the very liveliness of modern lives. Rightly or wrongly, it has become one of the clichés of the generation of modernists who formed their outlook during and after the spectacular violence of the First World War, and in an age where the routines of daily life were bent ever more by and toward the aims of industrial capitalism, that life in modernity is not only lifeless, but even hellish. This is not far from the attitude of T. S. Eliot's speaker in The Waste Land, who recalls that "[u]nder the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (61-63), nor is it far removed from Ezra Pound, whose Cantos open with a version of Homer's Odyssey and the famous episode in which the hero descends into the underworld of Hades to speak with the spirit of the blind seer Tiresias. In Pound's hands, Odysseus, not unlike the speaker of The Waste Land, becomes a figure of the modern subject striving to resurrect a vision of cultural life from a chaotic and decayed modernity, to transform a vast and senseless expense of life into some kind of sacrifice, some

27 From Collected Fictions, trans. Andrew Hurley (112-113).
object of knowledge that sense might shape—to transform the "bloody bever" into the seer's "soothsay" (4). Though it would be unfair to reduce this pair only to a cipher of modernist pessimism or to claim that their views are indicative of the modernist period in general, the early twentieth century provided more than a few pretexts for pessimism if one were so inclined. On the one hand, the world wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 underscored just how readily, rapidly, and efficiently vast numbers of people could be organized, armed, and eradicated in the service of nationalistic and economic ends. Though the American Civil War had already suggested what the modern industrial battlefield might look like, few who had witnessed the Civil War could have expected bloodshed of the magnitude seen in the First World War. Though the United States did not enter the war until its penultimate year, the costs that it endured—financial, emotional, mortal, and otherwise—were so profound that they helped to shape a lasting period of American "isolationism," at least as far as intervention in foreign wars was concerned, that lasted more or less until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Johnstone 8-9). But war was not alone in mocking the fragility of human life. In 1918, with the final months of the Great War as a backdrop, the so-called "Spanish flu" reached pandemic proportions and ravaged civilian and military populations alike. In the United States, the disease actually claimed more lives—some half a million by 1920, when the pandemic receded—than the war itself (Cassedy 15). The startling death toll of the Spanish flu was particularly striking as it came at a time when the average American could expect to live longer than any of her ancestors (15). While the war provided a stark and explicit demonstration of the human capacity to inflict death on an enormous scale, the pandemic of 1918 was a reminder that the subtler, more surreptitious threat of death by illness could strike with all the sudden intensity and calamity of war.
Despite all of these causes for pessimism, for all these signs that life remained as precarious in the age of modernity and "progress," as fragile and easily broken a thing, as it had been a century earlier, there was, as Steven Cassedy notes, a peculiar countercurrent of public and popular optimism at the beginning of the 1920s. Well-known public figures and medical authorities like Dr. Stephen Smith (co-founder of the American Public Health Association) and Dr. Charles V. Chapin, the Rhode Island superintendent of health, wrote and lectured on the possibility of radically extending human life expectancy, even to the point of arriving, as Smith declared in 1921, at a "[l]ife that suggests immortality" (qtd. in Cassedy 5). These optimistic visions of lives lived on years won progressively back from death by modern medicine were apparently unperturbed by the fact that the deadliest outbreak of infectious disease in modern memory had occurred only a few years earlier (Cassedy 15). To my mind, this optimistic strain is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that there was a sense in the public imagination that a new measure of life could be seized from death, and thus that life itself was not a fixed allotment, but variable; secondly, it points to a popular narrative that the movement of modernity has involved—and will continue to involve—a progressive incursion of life into death, a narrative that is contemporary and at odds with the pessimistic visions of many of the literary modernists, for whom modernity was evidence of a prolonged and regressive surrender of life to death, or to a death-like life. While high literary culture and popular medical culture appear to have been at odds over the prospects for life, it is worth pointing out that they were actually concerned with different objects. Where the modernists took death itself as an object of knowledge (even if only a speculative one) and sought to use it as a means of questioning the value of modern life, the popular medical discourse could not conceive of death at all, except to see its own heroes—doctors, scientists, and other upholders of the ideals of progress—as
pioneers on the dim frontier of death. The efforts of Smith and Chapin in the early 1920s reflect the early stages of the medicalization of life, and thus also of death, which by the 1950s was deeply entrenched in American culture (Ariès 583). If the progressive idea that life could be extended indefinitely also meant the expulsion of death, then a space was necessary in the meantime to shelter that death, and to shelter the living from the dying. In short, the popular strain of optimism depended not only on medicalization, but on the very denial of death from which it is inseparable. Philippe Ariès observes that "[t]he hospital is the only place where death is sure of escaping a visibility—or what remains of it—that is hereafter regarded as unsuitable and morbid" (571). That is not to say that there are not medically valid reasons for the hospitalization of the dying, but rather that the popular optimism fueled by the suggestions of Smith, Chapin, and others did not take death as an object of contemplation, as something suitable or important to think about in its own right, nor could it conceive death and life except as a dualism; death could not be thought as integral to life, but only as its antagonist. Medicalization sought—and seeks—to deny death its power, to shield us from its grief, but at the cost of denying death itself, of refusing to acknowledge any limit to the range of human powers. Paul Fairfield paraphrases the underlying logic of this denial: "If the thought of death, many now reason, does not promote happiness, it can only be counterproductive to life's singular purpose" (19). We thus arrive at a set of oppositions: on the one hand is a popular culture that is deeply infused with the ideals of progressivism and humanism, which sees the marriage of the medical profession with modern science and technology as a means of erasing death from life, and thus of perfecting the latter, and which looks hopefully into the future confident in the knowledge that the past will be succeeded; on the other is a branch of high literary culture that self-consciously rejects the progressive ideal that scientific and technological advancement will intrinsically lead
to the gradual perfection of the human being, and which looks fearfully, anxiously into a future that it fears to be a farcical, fragmented rendition of a past that was nobler and more whole, which takes death to be an object of contemplation not because it possesses any intrinsic vitality, but precisely because modern life, having become like death, has lost its vitality in a decadent and broken world.

In the chapter that follows, I will argue that there is a counter-current of American modernist writers who take up the challenge of thinking and writing about death neither to deny its reality nor to lament its effects, but rather to trouble and transform the way they think about life. I speak particularly of Djuna Barnes and her novel *Nightwood*, and of the poems of Delmore Schwartz and the later Wallace Stevens. These writers take up and elaborate earlier modes of death writing that emerged from the Transcendentalist ferment of mid-nineteenth century New England and which themselves were shaped, at a much farther remove, by the monistic philosophies of Spinoza and the Stoics. This monistic strain is particularly strong in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson, given that both write of life and death as two ways of seeing a single vital power. Here, death retains its distinction, its particularity as a process, but loses all its autonomy; Emerson and Dickinson, like the modernist death writers who succeed them, see death as an integral mechanism in a broader, impersonal vital order from which it cannot and must not be separated, whether they characterize that order as a pantheistic Nature, as Emerson does, or as a vast poetic imagination, as Dickinson does. The modernist death writers deepen and radicalize this monistic strain and tend to see no opposition between life and death; for these writers, death is the unruly part of living, the immanent and chaotic principle that differs living forms from themselves; in these modernists, the thought of death converts quite subtly, but substantially, into what Spinoza terms "a meditation of life" (*Ethics* IV.P69).
Schwartz and Stevens take their primary cues from Emerson, and especially the Emerson of "Experience," and extend his musings there to develop a new scheme for viewing the relationship between death and knowledge. In Stevens's final volume, 1954's The Rock, and in such Schwartz poems as "Summer Knowledge" and "The First Morning of the Second World," we find an implicit rejection of the idea that death might conceal any mystical knowledge about the super-natural world, the beyond-of-death, or that the suffering of the bereaved might be repaid by the future and otherworldly joy of reunion with the dead. With Emerson, they contemplate death as a means of discovering affective knowledge about the living world, and of re-founding the capacity for joy in experience, knowing that life and death are not separate, and that there are no lived experiences that death does not colour.

Like Dickinson, Barnes suggests in her writing that death is an essential component in the process of making meaning, and, by extension, in art, since the sense of life is itself dependent on the senselessness of death; death, as a foregone conclusion, as an integral and guaranteed part of any finite life, is the nonsense that must be worked, shaped, and lived into meaningful forms of sense. For Barnes in Nightwood, as for Dickinson, literature has a unique role to play in making death present to the living—not just the mourning of death, but the impossible experience of death itself. Although the phrase "the experience of death" is an oxymoron (that experience would be the very unraveling of the being that could have and report an experience), these writers make death exist and speak as singular and unique imaginary force. The thought of and about death is intrinsically speculative, casting itself against a limit that we cannot cross—we cannot live our deaths. In presenting death imaginatively, Dickinson and Barnes find ways of engaging with it, of accepting that death is not only a necessity that will one day befall them, but that it is in fact immanent to any lived experience, that it is an ongoing process of qualitative
differentiation in our lives. By confronting death’s immanence and realizing it as necessary, as inescapable, Dickinson and Barnes also invent a kind of freedom—not from death, but from the fear of it. Literature thus proves to be a means of confronting death actively, of refusing either to deny or to be entirely determined by its necessity.

Common to all three modernists is a desire to avoid the facile opposition of life against death that underlies much of the popular optimism of the period, while at the same time rejecting the idea that life in modernity has become debased by its closeness to death. With the popular optimism of the 1920s, the modernist death writers share the sense that life is not a given allotment, but malleable; with the pessimists, they share an unflinching desire to account for death directly, a refusal to deny its reality, and perhaps even a sense that life is decadent—not decadent by way of a fall, or by a sense of the depravity of American culture in the modern age, but decadent in a fully and perversely positive sense, where decadence amounts to a voluntary and sometimes even a joyful literary attitude: an embrace of death as that which one cannot live without, under whose shadow all experiences are lived. These death writers are neither optimists nor pessimists in their relationship with death, but instead provide a means by which the former can converse with the latter, while abandoning—or at least complicating—any theological or mystical efforts to recuperate sacrificial or otherworldly meanings from death. In their hands, the meditation of death ceases to be truly morbid and becomes instead a Spinozan meditation of life.

In order to show how this meditation begins to emerge in Emerson and Dickinson, and how Barnes, Schwartz, and Stevens deploy it as a tool to resolve the tension between the popular, medico-scientific optimism and the high literary pessimism of Pound and Eliot, it is first necessary to survey the concepts that such a meditation involves. The first of these concepts, one that we must avoid taking for granted at any cost, is that of life itself. Without a clear
understanding of the fine points of this term, we cannot understand where Spinoza comes and goes among the modernist death writers. I do not pretend that these writers share any overarching theory of life, but I argue that their works are shaped—and not always consciously—by a number of sources, from Emerson's pantheistic philosophy of Nature to Henri Bergson's phenomenally popular 1913 lectures on his philosophy of the *élan vital*, that conceive of life not only as immanence, but as an animating force, an immanence-in-process (Cassedy 42). Certainly, none of the modernists reproduce Spinoza's thinking *in toto*, but more than enough traces of Spinoza and his thinking were available in one form or another during the period to justify a reading of these modernists that employs his concepts and his reasoning. Many prominent intellectuals of the period, from Bergson and Samuel Alexander to Albert Einstein, either acclaimed the prescience of Spinoza’s philosophy or turned to him as a resource for conceptualizing various problems in modern science and philosophy. With that in mind, in the following pages I will observe a distinction between the proper noun "Life," which marks the vital order at the highest level of abstraction, where it is infinite, indeterminate, and absolutely immanent, which corresponds to what Spinoza calls "*Deus sive Nature,*" God or Nature, and the common nouns "life" or "lives," which mark the various ways that the infinite and abstract Life manifests itself in finite, concrete determinations. As Gilles Deleuze argues in "Immanence: A Life," if we are to avoid distorting Life into a theological or super-natural entity and preserve Spinoza's understanding of Life as immanence, we cannot imagine that Life is immanent to any particular thing, or that it is only a higher, synthetic unity of its finite forms; in other words, we do not reach indefinite, impersonal Life by aggregating individual lives or by turning the screws of a dialectic until we reach the absolute (26-27). There is no sublation that gets us from life and death to Life itself, nor can death be seen as a mere illusion in a greater process; on the contrary,
as I will argue shortly, death must have a singular and wholly positive function of its own, but one that cannot be seen in any opposition to the lives it affects. "Life is not dialectics," declares Emerson, who is perhaps unaware of how important a distinction he is making for those who will follow him ("Experience" 478). If Life is not dialectical, as Spinoza and the thinkers of radical immanence maintain, then it makes little sense to consider its finite expressions of life and death in opposition, precisely because they are determinate expressions of a single potency. As Giorgio Agamben explains, the "vertigo of immanence is that it describes the infinite movement of the self-constitution and self-manifestation of Being" ("Absolute Immanence" 235). Our lives cannot be rightly distinguished or separated from the world and the existence in which we live them, and though we naturally take the idea of our own deaths and those of our loved ones quite personally, conceiving of Life as pure immanence means rethinking death as something that is itself immanent to us and which conditions—but must not preoccupy—our living. We must be able to entertain, in short, a kind of morbid vitalism.

Now that we have a working definition of Life, I want to clarify how it relates to the sense of death that we encounter in monistic modernism and what it would mean to convert the thought of death into a meditation on Life. When Spinoza announces in the Ethics that "[a] free man thinks of death least of all things" (IV.P69), he is at once miming the rhetorical gestures of a long and rich tradition of Stoic thinking about death and bending that rhetoric to fit a definition of "free" that is for him quite technical. This quiet intervention of Spinoza's is important for two reasons: firstly, it shows us a way of thinking about death that does not demand we efface our emotions about it or withdraw into a kind of askesis, but instead demands that we consider the links between how we feel and how we know; secondly, Spinoza’s revision of Stoicism resonates with Emerson’s and Dickinson’s revision of the Stoic strain in American culture.
Stoicism was a significant influence on the deism that proliferated among the American founders, especially insofar as the Stoics provided rationales for identifying personal happiness with the cool impersonality of civic virtue (Stewart 301-302). Like Spinoza in his adaptation of the classical Stoic tradition, Emerson and Dickinson’s death writing embraces the Stoics’ sense of the liberating power of self-discipline and contemplation but rejects their association of this practice with the ideal of apatheia (disciplined restraint of the emotions) and their denial that death has anything to do with us. When Emerson and Dickinson turn to writing about death, they do so in part to revise this Stoic element in American culture, undermining some of its aspects while appropriating others; they often do so by echoing, wittingly or otherwise, Spinoza's earlier transformation of the Stoic position.

To understand what Spinoza means when he writes that “a free man thinks of death least of all things,” we must understand how his definitions of freedom, knowledge, and affect imply a break from the Stoic distinction between emotion and reason. To the Stoics, a free person does not fear death because she is not enslaved to the extremes of her emotions and has learned to view death detachedly, as nothing more than a natural occurrence, "nothing else than a release of the elements from which every living creature is composed," as Marcus Aurelius puts it (11). The free will of reason stands opposite to the fearful enslavement of the emotions. Though Spinoza follows Marcus Aurelius's understanding of death as a release of elements, he wholly rejects the idea that reason frees us by mastering the emotions (Gatens and Lloyd 42). For Spinoza, freedom, knowledge, and affect are inseparable: freedom comes not from refusing to experience our passions, but from understanding how we are made subject to them by affective encounters with other bodies or minds—from knowing what kinds of encounters are empowering and which are not. When I discover that an encounter expands my capacity to feel or act, I
experience the affect of joy, which puts me in a fortuitous relation with another body, and when I discover that my powers of acting or feeling have contracted, I experience the affect of sadness, which isolates me (Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 50; Gatens and Lloyd 53). The aim here is to pass from this limiting isolation to the liberating knowledge of reason, which Spinoza argues is made up of "common notions," formal rules or sets of parameters that we discover and by which we know how our body can enter into agreeable relations with another (Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 54-55). Nothing more dramatically separates us from our powers of acting, nothing is sadder, than imagining our own death, or the deaths of those who give us joy and who we love. We are unfree when we think of it because it saddens us; it saddens us because we fear it. Fear, says Spinoza, "is inconstant pain arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt" (*Ethics* III.Def13). We do not know the outcome of our death—we know that others have died and had their relations to others and to themselves de-composed in the process, but often we are unconvinced—we live, feel ourselves living, and cannot imagine what it would feel like not to feel. Maurice Blanchot eloquently phrases this uncertainty of death in *The Space of Literature*, where he declares that "[n]o one is sure of dying. No one doubts death, but no one can think of certain death except doubtfully" (95). In fear, the object of uncertainty is something to be reviled, a cause of pain or sadness. The fear of death is the anticipation of a pain whose existence we believe enough that it hurts us, but not enough that it is truly possible to be accustomed to it. Death is thus insoluble to all but the freest of people, whose freedom is not for the choosing, but dependent in large part on the unpredictable felicities of having a plethora of liberating encounters. But who is wholly free? Who fears nothing at all? These are limit cases or aspirations, rather than practical options. Thus, for Spinoza, fear ensures that death will always remain a problem. Though the Stoics can treat
death as something separable from us, unreal to the extent that we never live it, for Spinoza, it
shades all our living.

Perhaps it is better to hold out hope, to imagine that after death we will be free from pain,
or restored unto ourselves in a hereafter? Not so for Spinoza. The affective structure of hope, he
argues, is identical to that of fear (both involve the anticipation of an outcome that is uncertain),
but where fear involves a painful prospect, hope involves a pleasurable one. If the uncertainty of
pleasure may seem to us more tolerable than that of pain, Spinoza intends to disappoint us:

[T]here is no hope without fear and no fear without hope. For he who is in
hopeful suspense and has doubts as to the outcome of a thing is assumed to be
imagining something that excludes the existence of the hoped-for thing, and so to
that extent he feels pain. Consequently, as long as he is in hopeful suspense, he
fears as to the outcome. (Ethics III.Def13.Exp)

To hope for a better outcome is to doubt that it could come at all and to fear that the outcome
may be different. Fear involves a constant oscillation between imagining the onset and the
absence of pain; if we fear an outcome, we also hope that the outcome will not be what we fear.
Likewise, if we hope for something better, we also fear that it will not come. The consequence of
this reasoning is that hope and fear are not really different concepts, but two poles of a single
concept that, even when it involves a joyful prospect, can involve it only in a constant oscillation
between joy and sadness. More troubling, we might even say that hope, in its inseparable relation
to the disempowering affect of fear, tends to prevent us from acting in ways that extend our
capacities to act or to feel. In short, hope makes nothing better. It is frequently the case that one
or another ethical or political figure will invoke or valorize hope as a “way out” of the difficult
predicaments of the present, or at the very least as a horizon that we must leave open if ever we are to imagine an alternative to what is fearful in our given time. What Spinoza aims to show is that this hope is not only vain, but pernicious: whatever one founds upon it is less than unhelpful—it is paralyzing. This crux between hope and fear is especially important for the death writers who address the tension in modernity between the popular optimism, which hopes for an end to death, and an élite pessimism that fears the deathliness of life. When I turn to my analysis of modernism, I will refer to this crux as the affective problem of death. Its essence is that hope and fear cannot be resolved dialectically, since there is not opposition between hope and fear—let alone pessimism and optimism—in the first place. Spinoza's analysis of hope and fear suggests that only a non-dialectical approach to death can rescue us from this false opposition. The affective problem, then, is one of discovering how to slip the vicious circularity of hope and fear, of discovering, in a manner of speaking, a way of being hopeless. When the modernists turn to this problem of escaping the trap of hope and fear, they begin down a path cleared by Emerson and Dickinson, who intuit that hopelessness, to be livable, must offer some possibility of joy. For these two writers, the production of a joyful hopelessness is the imperative of death writing, the pursuit of which leads them to a perverse rendition of Stoicism—not a disciplined erasure of death from the concerns of the living, but a disciplined contemplation of death as a twin to life, a vitality darkly robed by morbidity.

Let us look a little closer at how one passes from the fear of death into the meditation of Life. Can we be at once hopeless, free, and joyful? When Spinoza says that the free do not think of death, he is expressing what ought to be the case, not what is. Deleuze observes in a 1981 lecture on Spinoza that "you are born neither reasonable, nor free, nor intelligent" ("Spinoza: 20/01/1981"). The consequence of this view is that one cannot simply be free from the thought of
death by repressing it. I encounter an intimation of death with every experience of sadness, every
time I decompose a relation with something or someone else, and every time that I am limited.
We cannot help but to encounter sadness and, in it, a degree—however small—of our own
passage toward death. Though the aim of "good" life in the immanence of Life itself is joy,
Spinoza does not suggest that we can simply pare away everything that saddens us; there is no
alternative but to experience sadness as well as joy, no possibility for any progressive escape in
which sadness recedes like the view of a dead-end town in a rear window. On the other hand,
many thinkers and artists have imagined that there is wisdom, nobility, even sanctity to be gained
from some forms of suffering and death. Even Michel de Montaigne, who helped to renew early
modern interest in classical skepticism and in the Stoics, suggests in a famous essay, "To
Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die," that "all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually
come down to one conclusion; which is to teach us not to be afraid of dying" (17).28 Where
Montaigne advises in his essay that we should think about death as frequently as possible in
order to become accustomed to it, Spinoza understands that any living body is equally a dying
one; we need no acclimatization to death because we know it well—it is not different in kind, but
only in magnitude, from sadness. More importantly, there is nothing even to learn about death;
Deleuze underscores the point: "Spinoza means something very simple [about affective
encounters], that sadness makes no one intelligent" ("Spinoza: 24/01/1978"). For these reasons,
Spinoza refuses to prescribe that we fixate on death to anesthetize its fear. And yet, Spinoza does

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28 Montaigne was a principle influence on Emerson, who devotes an essay of his Representative Men to him
("Montaigne; or, the Skeptic"). Curiously, Emerson concludes that essay with a moral that sounds particularly
Spinozan: "The lesson of life is practically to generalize; to believe what the years and the centuries say against the
hours; to resist the usurpation of particulars; to penetrate to their catholic sense" (709). Compare Emerson's
emphasis on the "catholic sense" of particulars with Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's common notions: "[Common
notions] represent something common to all bodies (extension, motion and rest) or to some bodies (at least two,
mine and another). In this sense, common notions are not at all abstract ideas but general ideas" (Spinoza: Practical
Philosophy 54).
not ask that we put death away. He refuses to prescribe that we do not think about death, or that death can simply be erased. If death is immanent to life, there could be no point—and no way—to purge it from our thoughts. Denial or fixation: these were the options of the popular optimism and the pessimistic high modernism hundreds of years later, anticipated and refused in the strain of immanence that Spinoza helped bring to maturity. In refusing either denial or fixation, in stating the simple definitional fact that, per his definition, a free person is one who thinks least of all of death, Spinoza actually preserves the idea of death—as do the modernists who write in a Spinozan vein—as something intrinsically and necessarily problematic, a thought that persists almost hauntingly as a condition for thinking about Life. This approach has no utopian ambitions and grants that it is not possible to transcend the intrinsic sadness of imagining one's own death, or of experiencing the death of a loved one; the aim is instead to transfigure the thought of death as an ending (expulsion from this world into a beyond) into an awareness that life and death are only two names for a single process—they work according to the same rules; what one composes, the other decomposes. Death becomes like a coloured glass through which we see, but whose very intimacy to this act of seeing prevents us from focusing on it too directly. By thus recognizing death as a transcendental condition of our experience and as one of the ineluctable components of all our common notions, in converting the negative, hostile, and personal death (the death in which we die) into the impersonal death through which everything lives (the death that is not restriction but necessity, not negation of power but the very structure of its exercise), those who would be free occupy themselves in the perpetual process of making themselves so.

These are the philosophical senses in which death and life belong to one another in a world of immanence, but how does this belonging translate into matters of literary practice? The question, from the outset, is one of style, albeit in a specific sense. Two adjectives that often (and
sometimes rather uncritically) find their way into the vocabularies of critics writing about the styles of Barnes, Schwartz, or Stevens are "decadent" and "baroque"—terms that might seem to distinguish these modernists from Emerson’s optimistic philosophy of nature, but which I read as markers of a Spinozan strain of morbid vitalism. Ina Danzer writes of Barnes's adherence to the "art pour l'art" ideals of the French decadents of the fin de siècle and argues that Barnes's "bohemian, decidedly anti-bourgeois life style and her irreverent style of writing place her in the decadent tradition" (241). Later, Danzer refers to "[t]he many baroque, grotesque images in Nightwood" as support for Barnes's belonging, at the same time, to the lineage of the surrealists (256). Yvor Winters writes somewhat condescendingly of how "[s]ome major poets are greater than others, and a poem by Mr. Stevens, technically decadent because tinged with his vice—Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds, for example—may suffer extremely little from its decadence and be in other respects a poem of tremendous power" (“Primitivism and Decadence” 95). In an essay on stylistic excess and disproportion, Tony Hoagland says of Stevens that he "may have been the first poet in whose work I recognized elements of style as deliberately excessive," which leads him to imply that it is in this sense that "Stevens is sometimes called baroque" (258). Phillip L. Beard describes Schwartz's darkly romanticized posthumous reputation as that of "a Baudelarian [sic] outsider in a strong but aimless stride in a darkening city" (61) and how the "Freudian and idealist impulses contend like strains of baroque counterpoint in the larger fugue of Schwartz's verse" (64). When Schwartz titled the second sub-section of part one of 1959's Selected Poems: Summer Knowledge, he himself alluded to the baroque, calling it "The Repetitive Heart: Poems in Imitation of the Fugue," after the contrapuntal style of composition that became a calling card of baroque music.
Obviously, this is a broad array of references; while it would be irresponsible to imagine that these critics and writers all intend the same thing by decadence or the baroque, a few common features emerge. Danzer speaks of decadence in the historical sense, referring to the aesthetic sensibility that emerged out of mid-19th century and fin de siècle France that viewed bohemianism and the very artificiality of art as a means of antagonizing the orderly, classical tendencies of a complacent bourgeoisie. As Matei Calinescu has shown, the term “decadence” developed in the circles of French art criticism—initially as a pejorative, before being appropriated by the likes of Paul Bourget and Charles Baudelaire—as a term that diagnosed the failings of romanticism (161). Désiré Nisard, one of the earlier and more incisive critics of decadence, identified at least three characteristics that are relevant to my purposes here: decadence exhausts the expressive power of language in its exaggerated and overwrought use of detail and embellishment (it is in this sense "artificial"—it rejects the idea that art should be subordinated to the adequate representation of nature); it elevates imaginative association and fancy over reason; and it puts language to use as a form of dangerous seduction (Calinescu 160-161). This is the image of the decadent poet to which Beard alludes when he describes the Schwartz of popular imagination as a "Baudelarian outsider," an antagonist against a particular set of established, classical literary values. A fourth quality of decadence, of particular importance to Baudelaire himself, is its "systematic attempt to break down the conventional boundaries between diverse arts"—in other words, decadence refuses the idea of there being any devices or concepts peculiar to, say, music or architecture, but also to literature (Calinescu 166). It is the artificiality and the formal promiscuity of decadence that recommends the term to Winters, for whom it marks a class of failed poetry: the decadents are "those who display a fine sensitivity to language and who may have a very wide scope, but whose work is incomplete
formally [...] or is somewhat weakened by a vice of feeling" (90-91). In other words, decadent art may evoke feeling, but it feels wrongly, unnaturally, perhaps artificially.

Critics tend to use the baroque to designate qualities that, to my mind, are essentially of a kind with the sense of decadence as an artificiality that verges on impropriety. When Danzer refers to Barnes's baroque images in *Nightwood*, she uses "grotesque" as a rough synonym for what she designates by "baroque." The sense is not pejorative, but it speaks to what Nisard designates as the overwrought quality of decadence, or what J. K. Huysmans and Baudelaire understand as the valorization of artificiality: Barnes's images are grotesque because they are unusual, unexpected, in a sense excessive. When Hoagland informs us of Stevens's reputation as a baroque writer, he does so in the context of discussing his self-conscious use of artifice, the deliberate appeal to excessiveness; Stevens himself wrote of "the essential gaudiness of poetry".29 Beard invokes the "larger fugue" of Schwartz's *oeuvre* as a means of suggesting that the poet's work often involves an attempt at dialectical synthesis between his Freudian and Platonic impulses. While I do not share Beard's sense of the fugue—I will clarify my own sense of the poetic baroque shortly—it is worth mentioning that the defining feature of the fugue, and by extension of the musical baroque, is its effort to show the inexhaustibility, the potential infinitude, of combinations between a select number of patterns or musical themes. The fugue—which we must understand etymologically as that which flees, as the fugacious—is an exercise in differential repetition, an effort to see how radically a finite theme can be ornamented, inverted, voiced and re-voiced, without becoming a repetition of the same. In this sense, the fugacity of

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29 The context is a letter to William Rose Benét: "I think I should select from my poems as my favourite the Emperor of Ice Cream. This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry; that is the reason why I like it" (*Letters of Wallace Stevens* 263).
the theme in baroque music is akin to the exhaustion (or rather the approach toward exhaustion) of decadent language.

What is lacking from these conceptions of the baroque and of decadence, though, and what Barnes, Schwartz, and Stevens all provide, is a conception of death. Critics speak often of the decadent and the baroque as integral elements of these writers' styles, but often underplay the degree to which these modes of writing are invested in thinking about death as a paradoxically vitalizing problem in which subjectivity itself becomes a perpetual opening, a process of breaking down, an ongoing impersonalization. When I speak of a literary approach to death, or of "death writing," I mean not only writing that meditates on death—not only a thanatography—but death engaged in a process of writing. The “death” in this phrase cannot be grasped only as a descriptor for a mode of writing, but must also be understood as an agent, a participant in that writing. A writer is a composition of modes, involved at every moment in the de- and re-compositions of relations and powers by which one lives and dies. I will mark this sense in which writers seem quite self-consciously to share the pen with death with the term "decadence." To write decadently is to write of dying whilst dying, to write self-consciously as a being who is dying, who will necessarily die, whose death, whether quick or slow, cannot help but leave its mark on what is written. Further, though, it is to write of dying as a truly intimate part of life. On this point, we would do well to remember that Aristotle in De Anima includes in

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30 I use the term “decadence” not only in its historically conditioned sense, but as a kind of short-hand for a specifically “hopeless” attitude toward death. The historical sense is to my mind much more inclusive than the “hopeless” sense of decadence that I also mean by the term, so that some writers who are in many ways true to the historical sense of decadence would not fit the term as I use it. For example, in a significant recent study by Vincent Sherry (Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence), Pound and Eliot emerge as figures whose modernism was decisively influenced by the decadent movement. I do not dispute this picture in the least, but, as should become clear, I would not consider either of these poets to be “hopeless” decadents. In short, the decadence that I invoke is certainly related to historical decadence but is not synonymous with it; what I describe is, if anything, a specific and singular sub-set of decadent writers whose thinking is strongly inflected by the philosophy of Spinoza.
his definition of life not only the power of self-nourishment and growth, but of decay (Selections 177). Decadence recognizes this intimacy of life and death and seeks to find the creative force of the former operative behind the decaying force of the latter. Death writers, as I see it, discover time and again that the experience of death reveals the composite and contingent nature of the self. Whitman declares, with a deceptive simplicity, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself"; but if "myself" is always only this composite, death-splintered entity, or what Gilbert Simondon terms a "problematic" figure, that is, if a given self is primarily a confluence of capacities, then to sing oneself is actually to sing what this confluence, this composition, can make happen—and one of these happenings is surely that of dying (Sharp 38). A dying thing is one that finds itself at every moment incapable of permanence and a death writer is one who takes up the paradox of making one's own decomposition, one's passage into impotence, a full exercise of all one's powers—of transforming the very decay of affect into an affective experience. To write of death becomes what Rosi Braidotti calls "cultivating an approach, a 'style' of life" from one's death" (The Posthuman 135). Let us say that in decadence, life becomes a dying à la mode.31

Death writers do not take up this stylistic dying as a mere pose—they make style into a mode of criticism. It is here that Spinoza takes on a certain decadent resonance that can inform our understanding of the modernist death writers. In Five Faces of Modernity, Calinescu credits the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan with being one of the earliest critics to understand "decadence" as a potentially constructive stance. In his Cahiers de jeunesse, the young Renan contends that stylistic decadence is not a mark of inferiority, but of impatience with an age that relies too heavily on classical models for its literature and its thinking (Calinescu

31 I intend a double meaning here: dying stylistically, but, insofar as we imagine style "substantially" (seriously and from the point of view of substance, or Life, in its immanence), dying as a (de)composition of a given collection of modes.
163). The primary quality of the decadent writer is not the absolute novelty of her thought or the range of her imagination, but the sharpness of her critical faculties (163). One of the most frequent ways that this critical attitude manifested itself was in the stylistic and formal rebellion of artifice, or what Calinescu calls "the craze for the oversophisticated, excessively refined products of decadence" (164). In 1877, more than thirty years after penning the Cahiers, Renan, now a successful and well-established scholar of religion, delivered a laudatory address at The Hague to commemorate the second centenary of Spinoza’s death. In his address, Renan frames Spinoza as something of a master critic, a reveal of the "true aspect" of the Hebrew scriptures against the superstitions perpetuated by generations of Jewish and Christian scholars. When Renan turns to describing the irony that the Jewish community of Amsterdam had effectively excommunicated the greatest interpreter of the Jewish religious texts, one can hear with surprising clarity the echoes of Renan's—and even Nisard's—earlier theorizations of decadence: "The Synagogue denounced as a seducer the one who was to raise the maxims of the Synagogue to unequalled glory" (152, emphasis mine). Recall that Nisard denounced decadence specifically because its language was both deceptive and attractive. This worry of Nisard's mirrors the concerns of the Christian theologians and philosophers—and quite possibly also of the Jewish community in Amsterdam—who denounced Spinoza for using the language of God and religion while emptying that language of its properly theological content. The second decadent element in Renan's portrait of Spinoza is that Renan does not describe him as an absolute innovator, but as one who revitalizes the spiritual sensibility by mounting an internal critique against staid religious orthodoxies—that is, he uses the language of institutional religion in order to

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32 See Yirmiyahu Yovel's Spinoza and Other Heretics, Volume 1: The Marrano of Reason (Chapter Five, "Spinoza, the Multitude, and Dual Language") and Genevieve Lloyd's Providence Lost (Chapter Six, "Living with Necessity: Spinoza and the Philosophical Life") for fuller discussions of the various ways that Spinoza appropriates the language and terminology of rival positions and of religion while subverting their original content.
deconstruct it and render it anew. Does this make Spinoza a decadent? It may not be immediately clear how the aesthetic sense of the term “decadent” could apply to a philosophical method; however, if one of the hallmarks of decadence truly is, as Calinescu suggests, that it revels in the "oversophisticated, [the] excessively refined," then it is difficult to imagine a philosophical method that better fits this definition, for better or worse, than the quasi-Euclidean "geometrical method" by which Spinoza composes his *Ethics*. In any case, the Renan of 1877 speaks of Spinoza in a strikingly similar way as the young Renan of the *Cahiers* writes of the literary decadent as less imaginative that the classicist, but more critical. The critical impulse reflects a striving for improvement, for new, constructive relations to that which is subject to criticism. In short, the critical impulse, though necessitated by a sense of restriction or limitation, expresses a definitively vital and joyful desire to persist in being. Indeed, when the younger Renan asks if this difference makes an age of decadent literature "inferior" to a classical one, he replies without hesitation: "No, because it is more philosophical" (163). In a state of decadence, the literary and the philosophical approach one another—it is appropriate, then, that Schwartz, Barnes, and Stevens are so frequently spoken of as "philosophical" writers.

If decadence is the perspective in which dying is a life style, we can begin to see some of the ways that the decadent and the baroque can be spoken of in the same breath. In the preface to the 1954 edition of his debut work *A Universal History of Iniquity*, Jorge Luis Borges supplies a definition of the baroque that will serve us well here: "I would define the baroque as that style that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its own possibilities, and that borders on self-

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33 Spinoza's Latin term for this desire or striving to persist in being is *conatus*. It is one of Spinoza's deepest subversions of the metaphysics of being that he equates the essence of a thing with its *conatus*. There are no fixed essences, as the essence of any given thing is only this capacity to persevere and to fully exercise its powers of existing, which are indistinct from its powers of acting.
caricature [...] I would venture to say that the baroque is the final stage in all art, when art flaunts and squanders its resources" (4). Building on Borges's definition, I would add that death writing is an inherently baroque exercise, to the extent that it involves the exhaustion of any imagination of death and forces it back instead into the domain of life; it is in this sense, where death clings stubbornly to a living thought, that we might say that death is life's counterpoint. For Borges, the baroque is ever at risk of becoming self-parody since it is by its nature a style of extremes (and an extreme of style). Though Borges views this baroque with a certain ambivalence (he is after all reflecting after the fact on an early and stylistically immature work), his emphasis on the self-caricature of baroque writing is also insightful. If death, as Spinoza suggests, is only one movement in the complex dynamism of a Life whose processes are unending and self-organizing, then death itself is inexhaustible—it simply names one type of exchange in an economy of powers for which there is no absolute scarcity. Death is that which, being inexhaustible itself, exhausts the subject that seeks knowledge in it, and it mocks our very efforts; there is no knowledge to be found in death, but, as I have argued, there is no knowledge to be found without it either.

Death writing tends toward stylistic extremes out of necessity: since no final, dissolving death can be experienced, it cannot provide any experiential precedent for its representation. The effort to express artistically any aspect of such a death is a foray in the dark. Death is a fugacious object of representation. As such, it cannot be submitted to the criteria of natural or realistic depiction—we arrive, again, at decadence: a deliberate choice of artifice over naturalism, of the visible mask over the face itself—or better, of the face as a mask, of artifice and nature dissolved
into one another.34 “Our manner of appearing,” writes Susan Sontag in her essay “On Style,” “is our manner of being. The face is a mask” (18). In death writing, the avowedly artificial contrivances of style emerge as necessary, and sometimes surprisingly joyful, appearances of phenomena which cannot be represented or even presented, but only incorporated into the formal and stylistic apparatus of a work. The contrivances thus form a mask under which there is no “real” face. The results are diverse, from Stevens's chilly abstractions, to the late Schwartz's abandonment of polished, New Critical formalism for a frantic logomania, to the jarring and minute inquiries into the ceaselessness of decay that Barnes puts in the mouth of Dr. Matthew O'Connor in Nightwood, but they share a sense of performance, fabulation, or stylization whose stakes are no longer (strictly speaking) epistemological, but ontologically constitutive. The term that Deleuze uses for such an operative fiction, in which “making up” is no longer equivalent to falsifying, but to a genuine making—a poiesis, even a genesis—is “fabulation” (Smith, “Life” 214). The fabulator is one who makes up a fiction not to escape a given reality, but to constitute it otherwise; thus, the decadent-as-fabulator wears the mask of death not to hide, but to transform the role that the decadent performs. In fabulation, we are not concerned with what is being fabulated, but rather with how it is being fabulated—fabulation, in other words, must be understood as a kind of pragmatics, an experiment aimed at discovering what qualitative differences can be instantiated by the fabulator (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 139). The stylization or fabulation of life in no way admits a distinction between an objective truth and a subjective falsity that is mistaken for objectivity. Death writing poses an interesting example of fabulation because, in a manner of speaking, death is translucent: we can see through

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34 I do not mean, of course, that a realistic representation of the external processes of death—of another’s death—are impossible. What demands artifice is the representation of death “from within,” of the lived experience of death, so to speak.
it, but not clearly, and not to another side; indeed, all we see is the life we live, while the death
we continue dying remains distinct, but incapable of becoming an object of focus. In short, death
has so little to do with us—and, paradoxically, so much—that any approach toward it could only
be contrived, imaginary, speculative—even metaphysical. We cannot avoid fabulating or
stylizing when we write of death. It is in this specific sense that death vexes us into a kind of
self-caricature.

II. Hopelessness in Emerson and Dickinson

In the American death writing of the nineteenth century, we begin to see come together
the principal qualities of the attitude I have shorthanded by the term "decadence": the
abandonment of hope, the identification of life and death in a single paradigm, and with it the
recognition that death in itself is never a source of free knowledge, but that knowledge and
freedom are unthinkable outside of it. Joining this recognition is an understand of life as style
and the discovery of a new "baroque" mode of composition that embraces artificiality and
"exhaustion" as forms for expressing the mutual interpenetration of life and death within the
immanent framework of Life itself. The period has no shortage of what might be called death
writing, including writers who are otherwise quite different from one another. On the one hand is
a poet like Edgar Allan Poe, whose best-remembered and most frequently anthologized poems
(we might think of "The Conqueror Worm," "The Raven," and "Annabel Lee") dwell on the
inevitability of death, the haunting persistence of the dead to the living who loved them, and the
power of artworks and aesthetic experiences to preserve and reanimate the dead. On the other
hand, we have a poet like Walt Whitman, who declares in a remarkable early passage of "Song
of Myself" that the vital, thriving grass of the earth may well be "the beautiful uncut hair of
graves," that his poem of life is not at odds with death, but nourished by it, and moreover that the
"smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life, and
does not wait at the end to arrest it" (Poetry and Prose 31-32). Though there is no lack of subject
matter for viewing Poe, Whitman, and others as death writers, I will focus in the next few pages
on Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the two figures I see as mostly deeply informing
the vital decadence of the modernists. In 1862, Dickinson enclosed several of her poems in a
now-famous letter to the lecturer and essayist Thomas W. Higginson in response to an article he
had published in the Atlantic Monthly. In his article, Higginson issues a challenge to young
writers: "Charge your style with life" (The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson v, emphasis
mine). By that point, Dickinson had already fashioned death—albeit an oddly vital, life-like
death—into one of her signature themes and one of the most frequent touchpoints of a truly life-
charged, vital style. Within a matter of months, she had written many of the arresting poems on
death and the afterlife that secured her posthumous reputation, including "After great pain, a
formal feeling comes" (341), "I died for Beauty, but was scarce" (449), "I heard a Fly buzz—
when I died" (465), "Because I could not stop for Death" (712), and "The last Night that She
lived" (1100), which join a host of others in a canon that is replete with imaginary death-beds,
anticipations of immortality, and complex musings on the place of death between life and
afterlife.35 Emerson’s engagement with death is certainly less sustained and direct, but it is every
bit as complex and suggestive, nowhere more so than in 1844's "Experience." The essay's
famously bleak opening passages ("Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our
place again"; "We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to
invest") are written under the shadow of the death of Emerson's son, Waldo, who had succumbed

35 I follow the convention of listing the editorial numbers of Dickinson's typically compact poems rather than page
or line numbers. All references utilize Thomas H. Johnson's numeration from The Complete Poems of Emily
Dickinson.
to scarlet fever two years earlier, and much of its content deals with the question of how death could mean anything to us at all, how we could ever approach it as an object of knowledge (Essays and Lectures 471). In this essay, Emerson stages an encounter with the immateriality of death, the negative power that eradicates whatever sense one could make of its occasion and seeks to find in the encounter with death the grounds for a kind of necessitarian freedom that Spinoza would surely have recognized. Since Emerson so curiously frames his efforts in the death-haunted “Experience” as a striving to discover the "affirmative principle" of life, even as he seems to dash the hope that death could teach us anything at all, I will turn first to him and then to Dickinson (471).

I want to suggest that what is hopeless—affirmatively hopeless—in Emerson’s “Experience” comes most sharply into view when we place his work in relief against one of its unlikelier influences: Dante’s Inferno, a poem that Emerson probably read in both English and Italian, and whose verses are among some ninety references to Dante that appear throughout Emerson’s writings and correspondence (Mathews 171-172, 175). Early in the Inferno, Dante (the speaker) discovers that the gate of Hell bears the following inscription: "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER" (Dante 89). In order to correct his mortal path and to receive the fruits of a good life, the character Dante must descend into Hell to witness the tortures of a bad one. The condition of his attaining the joys of the Paradiso is that he first knows the torments of the Inferno. Dante’s guide in this task is the Roman poet Virgil, who aids him in interpreting the network of symbols that make up the allegorical features of Hell. Their journey together is thus a quest for the knowledge of how best to live in order to die and be rewarded well, but it is also a lesson in what an ill-led life can lose—in a sense, Dante’s voyage through Hell is a grieving for his own life, half-spent, and sinfully so, by the time we meet him in the
dark wood. With the guidance of Virgil, Dante “reads” the punishments of Hell to advance both his grieving and his knowledge that what is grieved can be regained. Virgil’s purpose is to ensure that Dante interprets well; we might say that Dante’s salvation is in a way hermeneutically won. He discovers that sin is, in life, the sign and promise of what becomes punishment and misery in death. Dante discovers—with Virgil’s intercessions—that the knowledge of death can lead one toward a better, more whole and holy knowledge of the good life. Thus, the hope that Dante is cautioned to abandon at Hell’s gate he resurrects in its depths, having discovered the fruits of sin, and Dante’s ascent into Purgatory at the end of the *Inferno* renders the inscription on Hell’s gate ironic. The movement of the *Inferno* insinuates that there is always hope for the sinner willing to live in the shadow and the footsteps of Christ—that with the good life there is hope.

Turning to “Experience,” we find Emerson tracing out a broadly familiar structure for his most death-minded essay as we see in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Just as Dante’s epic moves from the confusion and the lengthy meditation on suffering and loss that makes up the *Inferno* into the progressively more affirmative and joyous books of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, Emerson begins his essay with a description of profound trepidation, loss, and disorientation, which develops in the following pages into a vigorous search for the knowledge that will redeem or revive the energies, efforts, and feelings that have been anesthetized by loss. As if alluding to the famous opening scene of the *Inferno*, in which Dante awakens, lost and confused, in the dark wood, mid-way through his life, Emerson’s “Experience” opens similarly, *in medias res*, with an awakening: “Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe it has none. We *wake* and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and *out of sight*” (471, emphases mine). The stair is Emerson’s wood and the steps climbing onward, out of sight,
are his twisted path; like Dante, he awakens in the midst of a life profoundly changed by experiences of loss. I see these parallels as a kind of allusive structure that becomes evident only if we have the proper frame through which to view it—that is, only if we consider it from the point of view of the relationship between death and knowledge. The structure of “Experience” is not merely allusive, but ironic. In echoing Dante at precisely the moment that it contemplates the experience of grief, Emerson’s essay draws our attention to Dante’s understanding that death, negation, and fear could all be means of arriving at a redemptive knowledge of the good—an idea with deep roots in the history of Christian philosophy. Nevertheless, by echoing this sense of the relationship between death and knowledge, the essay frames its own startling rejection of its premises: “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature” (“Experience” 473).36

If grief could teach—if it could impart a lesson or an ethic, if it were able to posit knowledge—we could pierce it to see clearly our redemption. This is the hopefulness of grief that Emerson, or his persona, cannot embrace, though he might wish he could. As Stanley Cavell notes in a landmark essay on “Experience,” Emerson presents himself as one who is recovering from a disappointed expectation, an illusion, that grief could give him something (“Finding as Founding” 131). Hanging behind the quotation from Emerson above are unvoiced queries: Can grief ever be instrumental? Can sadness teach us anything? What is the subject of grief? To the first two questions, the answer is no, and we find Emerson on the side of Spinoza, who had argued some two hundred years earlier that “the power of the mind is defined solely by

36 To this end, Mathews observes that Emerson admired the formal execution of Dante’s works, but not necessarily their content. Dante appeared to Emerson “a prodigy of imaginative function, executive rather than contemplative or wise” (quoted in Mathews 188). Emerson’s ambivalence is consistent with my suggestion that he alludes in “Experience” to the formal organization of the Inferno’s first canto mainly in order to distance himself from the poem’s implicit philosophy and its understanding of the relation between death and knowledge.
knowledge, its weakness of passivity solely by the *privation of knowledge*” (*Ethics* V.P23.S chol5, my italics). It had been a common doctrine among Christian theologians from St. Augustine onward to argue that evil has no positive, substantial being in the world, but is only the absence of good; Spinoza, and here Emerson, extends this argument to the affects and, with them, to knowledge itself.37 The weakness of the mind is only privation of knowledge and the affect by which we experience our own weakening is sadness. It is here, where Emerson dramatizes the conversion of this Christian hopefulness into a Spinozan hopelessness, that we find one of the primary flashpoints between the thought of immanence (and with it the strain of Spinozism that I have argued informs a significant portion of American modernism) and the thought of death, about which even Spinoza has little to say. Emerson’s value here is in thinking through more deeply than his predecessors what it might mean to refuse either to fixate on or to deny death. I have suggested already that Spinoza sees death as necessarily problematic, as something that a wise person must leave suspended in thought, but it is in Emerson that we begin to find a productive examination of the problem.

Emerson opens “Experience” with a tone of disappointed hope, as one who had hoped that he might find in the depths of his grief the bottom of the endless stairs in whose midst his essay begins, as one who had hoped that, having found the stairs’ lower limit, he might follow them upward to their highest and most transcendent extremity, where the purview of great heights would assure him that the wandering in depths is not all there is. In place of all this, he finds only impotence and the deadening of his own capacity to be affected: “What opium is

37 Emerson offers a similarly affective take on the difference between evil and good in the Divinity School address of 1838: “Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute […] All evil is so much death or nonentity. Benevolence is absolute and real. So much benevolence as a man hath, so much life hath he. For all things proceed out of this same spirit, which is differently named love, justice, temperance” (77, italics mine). Just as Spinoza’s sad affects are only privations of a single power that strives always to affirm itself, evil here is only the nonentity—the death—of those affects and qualities (love, justice, temperance) that affirm a person’s power of being.
instilled into all disaster! It shows formidable as we approach it, but there is at last no rough
rasping friction, but the most slippery sliding surfaces” (472). Emerson’s declaration on grief is
so self-reflexive because, in a sense, grief deadens him too. In anesthetizing the capacity for joy,
grief deadens our power to know, to discover how our powers of acting (and feeling) are
disposed by our relations with others and with the world in which we find them. Like the
anesthetic bite of the mosquito that dulls us to sensation of being bitten, grief diminishes our
power to comprehend the circumstance we grieve. “There are moods in which we court suffering
in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth,” muses
Emerson, though already he intuits a Spinozan conclusion: “But it turns out to be scene-painting
and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is” (472). There is
no hard-won nobility to our suffering here and nothing on whose altar we might sacrifice
ourselves—our pretensions, guiltily maintained, to future joy and persistence in the world—for
the sake of the relation we have lost, only a realization that grief, sadness, and the thinking of
death cannot, in their own right, lead us to their opposites. This is the stance that I refer to as
Emerson’s hopelessness. If there were depths, we could descend them and keep still that relation,
could pin it and preserve it as it was. Yet, for Emerson, “[w]e live amid surfaces, and the true art
of life is to skate well on them” (478). In a world all surface, as if frozen into ice, there is no
ceasing and descent, no passage downward, inward, except that which ceases us from moving
and causes us to fall. To court suffering is to replace our lost relations with nothing, to diminish
ourselves in clinging to a life more death-like than before. The life of skating is the persistence of
Life even where lives have ended, and Emerson’s conviction is that this skating, this
continuance, though it poses always the difficulties of sliding us away from where we might like
to remain and of skating well, is the only course of the “affirmative principle” (471).
Lest Emerson—or I—seem too cavalier on a grave subject, one should bear in mind that Emerson is not proposing a simple choice between death’s false knowledge and the right knowledge of life. Emerson notably writes that “it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle” (471), that is, that we do not yet possess it. Elsewhere, he declares that “a man [sic] is a golden impossibility” and that “Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life” (482). What is to be gained in a life amid surfaces is not easily won, nor could it be obvious, a mere matter of willing hard enough. True to his roots in the philosophy of the Stoics (roots he shares with Spinoza), Emerson suggests instead that the affirmative principle, the power that animates our lives with the feeling of being well-lived—with joyful affect—depends on a kind of receptivity to what is necessary and a discipline toward it that declines to resent or to cling defiantly to what is lost. This is not to advocate a careless abandonment of any thought we might have of the deceased—it is, on the contrary, an acknowledgment that “[l]ife is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy,” by which I take Emerson to mean that it persists and, moreover, strives to persist. The essence of our lives, in other words, is not that we think, or that we make judgments, but that we endeavour to persist in being—our essence is only this striving that Spinoza calls conatus (478).

And yet, if our striving is conditioned from without, as both Emerson and Spinoza have it, are we not at the mercy of others, at least of other circumstances, to bring about an end to our grief? Is there not an admission that our interiority is, in fact, subject to whatever relations we fall into?

These are operative questions and I will return to them momentarily. To answer them, I would like first to turn to what I earlier described as the third query that hangs over “Experience”: who, or what, actually grieves? If we follow this question through, we will find that Emerson’s pursuit of an “affirmative principle” of life—a hopelessness that is in no way a
foreclosure of joy—entails an opening up of the interiority of the mind (we are no longer self-enclosed centres of thinking, but thought that is “out there” in the world) and a new understanding of the self as a “composition,” a composite, an assemblage brought together according to a certain style. From this diffuse and exterior notion of self comes a sense of the impersonality of our very person, of the being whose range of potentials includes dying and grieving. In short, the Emersonian self, as far as we get it in “Experience,” is 1) plural (or impersonal), 2) stylistic (or decadent), and 3) bound by necessity. To the first point, it would be an error to assume that Emerson is speaking of simple, self-evident individuals when time and again he invokes the plural pronoun “we.” With Spinoza, Emerson shares a penchant for using ordinary words in an extra-ordinary sense, and the failure to note this tendency has resulted in more than a few weak readings of essays like “Self-Reliance” and “Experience.” Regarding the latter, it is a given that the subject of grief is a living thing, but we will find that it is precisely this sense of what it means to live that is in question.

On this point, Emerson echoes Spinoza’s insistence that the individual is never stable or self-enclosed, but always a composite made up of relations to other powers of acting. This composite quality is often overlooked in the light of such famous declarations as Emerson makes in an 1840 journal entry, where he announces that “I have taught one doctrine, namely the infinitude of the private man” (*Selected Journals 1820-1842* 735). Given a statement like this one, the critic risks emphasizing the apparent unity of “the private man” at the expense of “infinitude.” A bounded, finite thing, a self-enclosed individual, cannot logically be infinite—finitude is entailed by its enclosure. The guarantee of this infinitude, then, must be that the individual composes itself out of an infinite range of external elements; the individual receives its infinitude on loan, as it were, from an infinite world. Thus, in “History,” Emerson declares
that “[man’s] power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being […] A man is a bundle of relations” (254). We find a similarly composite and impersonal understanding of the individual in “Experience,” where Emerson proclaims, as if in answer to the question of what kind of being experiences grief, that “[l]ife is a train of moods, like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (473). We should be aware of the delicate distinction that Emerson implies between Life (the “train of moods”) and what “we” are—while we are surely part of this Life, and inseparable from it (in the sense that we are capable of being affected), we ourselves are very little in comparison to it. If Life is the string of beads and we what passes through them, then we are the string conceived separately from the beads; we are the passing part of this Life, the part that gives a particular consistency to the moods—but the moods do not “belong” to us. Emerson strips the individual self, the particular life, of all its clothing and all that we might typically imagine as belonging to what makes us ourselves: our moods, the affective states and dispositions that make up the quality, the tone, the colour of our thinking. Without these, the notion of self that we are discussing ceases to be, as it is in the liberal tradition, a kind of primary unit of experience; the self becomes instead a kind of artifice, a way of seeing the relation between successive moods. This self is not a personal site of agency, but an impersonal procession of what we would be better off to call patience. The moods are like a succession of so

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38 To be sure, neither Emerson nor Spinoza are wholly outside of the tradition of liberalism—in many ways, they belong within it as well, if uncomfortably at times. George Kateb’s *Emerson and Self-Reliance* is perhaps the most prominent reading of Emerson as a thinker of liberalism. Spinoza, for his part, is frequently read—especially in English scholarship—as a kind of ur-liberal and has been discussed as such in Leo Strauss’s *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* and Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment*. Though I read Emerson’s “train of moods” as a challenge to the primacy that liberal thought grants to the individual self, I do not contest that other aspects of his thought support a liberal reading, or even that this impersonal and a-liberal view of self may be contradicted elsewhere in his works. It may well be Emerson’s greatest consistency, after all, that he feels free to be inconsistent.
many theatrical masks, so many stylistic stances to be taken, and thus our lives are artificial in this strict sense: whatever notion of a coherent self that we extract from this “train of moods”—and, to be sure, under certain circumstances we require such coherence—is a kind of fabulation of (and by) an impersonal self that is ontologically primary. Whatever agency arises from this fabulation cannot be localized in the self, but amounts to what Jane Bennett terms a “confederate” model of agency (23). There is a homology in this description of Emerson’s with the theory of mind that Spinoza lays out in the Ethics, which implies that we are not primarily the agents of thought, but its patients, insofar as we conceive ourselves as individuals. But our thoughts are not discrete, individual ideas contained in the mind, not our ideas of something, rather they are the something itself; the ideal is not representative or intermediary between the mind and the world but is the direct and immediate manifestation of that thing. In this sense, then, attaining knowledge (or joy) allows us to convert the patience inherent in our being finite modes (which are forever determined by external causes) into the activity of substance, or Life itself. The mind is no longer for Spinoza the receptacle of our ideas, but merely the idea of our body, modified by the affectations of other ideas. Thus, when I think, it is not me thinking my thoughts; on the contrary, I am being thought.

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39 In Vibrant Matter, Bennett describes her Spinozan model of confederate agency thusly: “the efficacy or effectivity to which [agency] has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (23).
40 It is in this specific sense that Spinoza is a panpsychist (he sees all entities, organic and inorganic alike, as possessing mind). For every extended thing, there is a parallel idea that expresses the same essence, and this idea is identical with what we call, in human terms, a mind. There is thus a “mind” of the stone on the sidewalk and a “mind” of the table before me, though each are capable of being affected in different ways. In his rejection of the primacy of personal, free-willing agency, Emerson is in league with Spinoza, but also with Bergson, whose significance for the modernists is difficult to overstate. As Gregory Dale Adamson notes, Bergson follows Spinoza when he asserts in Time and Free Will that an idea and an act occur simultaneously, and thus that the sense of decision or agency is always retrospective (Adamson 74). To be clear, though, the tradition of patience does not eliminate the concept of agency so much as free will. There is still agency in this tradition, but an agency that is always already pre-conditioned by an immanent cause (Spinoza), the succession of impersonal moods (Emerson), or an unstable, ever-changing virtual substrate from which the present is always emerging (Bergson).
It is this Spinozan reversal of the relation between thinker and thought that Emerson replicates and transmits to his modernist inheritors in “Experience,” this challenge to the free will conception of agency that refuses to ground itself in personality and sees passivity as the true form of agency. I will refer to this stance—this combination of impersonality, decadent style, and the sense of necessity—as an ethos of patience. We see it working in the figure of the Emersonian individual, where it entails a vision of selfhood as an ever-provisional fabulation of the impersonal (or pre-personal) stream of affects, the succession of moods. In the light of an ethos of patience, the individual exists in its strict sense only as a character. If Emerson sometimes seems to promote a kind of self-making, as in “Self-Reliance,” we must clarify that his fatalism prevents him from meaning this in the sense that the self shapes and reshapes its nature by an act of free will or a grasping out into the world; on the contrary, this self-making must take the form of a passivity to processes in which one is enveloped: to the passing train of moods, to the impingements of the affects, and, indeed, to death itself. This is not the passivity of inaction, but in fact a form of activity, akin to what Emerson elsewhere figures as intuition or whim. By taking on and performing such a passivity, the Emersonian individual no longer regards style or artifice as an epistemological concern—What is true? What is the margin between the actor and the acted character? —and reveals it instead to be an ontological question: What am I when these moods compose me? And if I am a passing thing, a decadent being that is always engaged in its own dying, and if that dying affects me to the extent that I am a series of my moods—these parcels of artificially discrete life whose death is wholly contained within an immanent, impersonal Life—what relation to these moods, to these objects of fabulation, will express the greatest proportion of Life? What, in short, will be the most joyful and knowing way

41 Here I intend a play on the habitual translation of the Greek ethos into the English “character”—not in the sense of a stage role, but of one’s habits and behaviour.
Emily Dickinson’s writing differs sharply from Emerson’s in many ways; however, a brief examination of her attitudes toward death will help to show the commonalities between the kinds of patience that they articulate. Though I do not claim that Dickinson belongs to the Spinozan strain as such, she nevertheless absorbed the influence of writers who were, including Emerson and George Eliot. Though Dickinson counted these two, alongside the Brontë sisters and Shakespeare, as her literary favourites, it is unclear how far she was willing to follow him in his thinking (McNaughton 206). “Dickinson struggled,” writes Roger Lundin, “to believe that mind and nature were knit together as Emerson had said they were, but she could not do so” (156). While Dickinson was sympathetic to Transcendentalism and Romanticism in many respects, she rejected these movements’ tendencies to affirm optimistically the powers of the self (Lundin 5). Dickinson’s view is perhaps best expressed in a phrase that Lundin quotes from Albert Gelpi: her “peculiar burden was to be a Romantic poet with a Calvinist’s sense of things; to know transitory ecstasy in a world tragically fallen and doomed” (qtd. in Lundin 25).

Dickinson emerges here and by reputation as a figure supposedly more respectful of the essential limits of human experience, more liable to consider human frailty, more inclined even to morbidity and fixation on death, than Emerson. This distinction of sensibilities—one optimistic, with a taste for the infinite, the other more pessimistic and inclined to the fundamental finitude of our existential situation—in some ways mirrors the distinction I have drawn between the popular medicalized discourse on death in the early twentieth century and the high modernist discourse that saw the very condition of twentieth century life as being death-like. And yet, this distinction between Emerson and Dickinson depends in part on an understanding of the former that fails to
consider just how central limitation and finitude is in his writing about death, as little of it as there is. The ethos of patience that I have laid out, which is composed of a decadent styling or composition of the self and a respect for the immutability of the events that befall us, is nothing if not an assertion that limitation is our only mode of experiencing the infinite. Likewise, the understanding of Dickinson as a poet more deeply grounded in the finite and the limited overlooks and oversimplifies the fact that her poetry also articulates the need for a kind of patience before death and tries not only to make death present to us, to alert us that it is immanent to every moment we live, but to allow us to find in that ever-presence of death a kind of freedom to live.

In 1880, an ocean away from Dickinson’s Amherst, George Eliot died. On reading the news, Dickinson writes to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross and memorializes Eliot, her favourite author and a woman Dickinson viewed as a kindred spirit, as “the lane to the Indes [sic], Columbus was looking for” (Howe 19). Susan Howe discusses this incident in My Emily Dickinson, her creative homage to the poet, and poses the question of why Dickinson should laud Eliot this way, rather than a fellow poet like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or fellow Americans such as Margaret Fuller or Harriet Beecher Stowe. Howe implies that Eliot’s ferocious intelligence, religious agnosticism, skeptical sensibility, and her open defiance of Victorian social conventions “by openly living with a married man” were all points of attraction to Dickinson, who saw in her an inventiveness, a daring, and a self-assurance that Dickinson desired for herself (19-20). Robert Weisbuch concurs that it is Eliot, above even Emerson, who Dickinson admires, citing Eliot’s “probing intelligence, an acknowledgment of the real and limiting, [and her] perception of mixed human fates” (8). In this emphasis on real and limiting factors and the mixture of fate, we find traces of Spinoza, whose affective theory of knowledge
revolves around the recognition of that which limits or conditions us, and depends on understanding that this limitation is, in fact, the trace of external causes acting upon us. A number of scholars have already explored the significance of Eliot to Dickinson, but to my knowledge none have yet explored Eliot as a source for the Spinozan resonances in Dickinson.\(^{42}\)

In 1856, before she had written any of the novels for which she is now famous, Eliot completed a translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* that, had it been published, would have been the first English edition of that work. Eliot undertook this translation at the encouragement of the philosopher George Henry Lewes, a married man with whom she lived for much of her life, much to her contemporaries’ scandal. Lewes himself was at the forefront of a Spinoza revival in Great Britain whose focal point was the circle of freethinkers associated with the *Westminster Review*.\(^{43}\)

Though it is perhaps impossible to trace precisely what Dickinson derives from Eliot, it should not go unmarked that Eliot was a second conduit, in addition to Emerson, for the Spinozan echoes in Dickinson’s attitude toward death. Simon Calder isolates three traces of Spinoza’s treatment of affect and the passions that he sees operating in Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*; since these traces appear in various guises in Dickinson’s poetry, they are worth repeating.\(^{44}\) The first trace that Calder notes is that both Eliot’s fiction and Spinoza’s philosophy suggest that the passions are not aberrations of nature, but continuous with it; in other words, the passions are not sins or virtues in their own right, but express natural laws—there is no super-, sub-, or quasi-natural domain in which human nature stands apart from other natures (176). The second trace of

\(^{42}\) On Dickinson’s relationship with Eliot, see Margaret H. Freeman (“George Eliot and Emily Dickinson: Poets of Play and Possibility”) and Barbara Mossberg (“Through the Transatlantic Lens of ‘my George Eliot’ and Percy Bysshe Shelley: Emily Dickinson’s Expatriate Soul in Postcards from the Edge”)

\(^{43}\) This group included Eliot, who served as the *Westminster Review’s* assistant editor, Lewes, who published on Spinoza both anonymously and under his own name throughout the 1840s and ‘50s, James Anthony Froude, who published an exposition of Spinoza’s philosophy in the July, 1855 edition of the *Review*, and William Hale White, whose 1883 edition of the *Ethics* was reprinted in four editions until 1910 (Boucher 4-5).

\(^{44}\) For an in-depth account of Eliot’s involvement with Spinoza and of his influence on her writing, see Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*, and Calder, “George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Literature.”
Spinozism in Eliot is that both writers treat the passions not as interpretations or mere
descriptions of a state of affairs, but as determinative forces—in other words, the ways in which
we are affected by our surroundings directly determines the range of actions we are capable of
performing (176). The final trace pertains to Eliot’s awareness of the double character of the
passions: every passion is at once singular, inasmuch as each passion involves specific bodies
being affected in specific ways, and general, to the extent that there is a characteristic type of
relation that we might term “sadness” or “joy” that, when fulfilled, will tend to produce a given
effect (176-77). The ethos of patience that I identify in Dickinson’s poetry depends in large
measure on a similar understanding of affect and the passions not as mere emotions, but as
ontologically constitutive—a part of the very fabric of the world—and as framing and
determining the entire range of our capacities to act.

In April of 1862, with the Civil War raging, a much younger Dickinson writes to the
Norcross cousins to inform them of the death of an Amherst boy who has been killed during the
Union Army’s advance through New Bern. At the end of her letter, Dickinson muses that “[’tis]
dangerous to value, for only the precious can alarm” (Letters 51). Her sentiment here is
essentially Stoical and echoes the pronouncements of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius that we
ought not to grasp too tightly at things that are ephemeral so that their deaths are less an injury to
us. In Dickinson’s case, to cling too much to any living thing, “to value,” has the danger of
making that thing precious, and thus of making its loss the more keenly felt; however, lest we
think that this ethos deprives us of the ability to value anything at all, as in so many caricatures
of the Stoic ideal of equanimity or apatheia, she goes on to consider herself as a poet who writes

45 See, for instance, Epictetus’s rather glib instruction in the Enchiridion: “Under no circumstances say ‘I have lost
something,’ only ‘I returned it.’ Did a child of yours die? No, it was returned. Your wife died? No, she was returned.
‘My land was confiscated.’ No, it too was returned” (225).
often of death, as one who “sang off charnel steps,” and concludes with the suggestion that her death writing is not morbid, but joyous: in light of it, “[e]very day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous” (*Letters* 51). Dickinson’s letter shows that she had been considering the problem of how to divorce the imagination of death—and of its inescapable necessity—from the sad affects, a problem akin to that which Spinoza identifies in his treatment of hope and fear. Though Dickinson appears never to have read Spinoza, she could have encountered a near-exact translation of his vocabulary on these questions via Eliot’s novels. In *The Lifted Veil*, for instance, the character of Latimer declares a grandiose pity for humanity, which he describes as “a being finely organized for pain, but with hardly any fibres that responded to pleasure—to whom the idea of future evil robbed the present of its joy, and for whom the idea of future good did not still the uneasiness of a present yearning or a present dread” (24). Human beings, per Latimer, are pitiable precisely because they are caught up in affective oscillations between fear (“the idea of future evil”) and hope (“the idea of future good”). In her thinking about death, Dickinson strives to put this oscillation aside, to neutralize or refigure it. In another letter to her cousins dated May 30, 1863, Dickinson continues this line of thinking. After relating that the mother of a local Amherst woman, Jennie Hitchcock, had been buried the previous day, Dickinson signs off with a telling epigram: “Life is death we’re lengthy at, / Death the hinge to life” (*Letters* 51). Life, in other words, is a slow dying, a gradual approach toward an inevitable point; more importantly, though, she implies that there could be no difference in kind between this individual life and the death that overtakes it. Here, in a perhaps more elegant form, is the central idea of what I have theorized as the baroque quality of decadence: Death is life’s counterpoint. Moreover, if death is “the hinge to life,” it is the point at which life bends toward some other direction—it is, in short, the movement of what Deleuze
calls a pure difference, bound to no other term, not “different from,” but purely different. Where life bends—where it differs—it does so through death, which accompanies life at every moment, de-forming it even as it re-forms itself. Faced with this immanence of death, the response that best preserves and affirms our capacity to act and to feel is, perhaps counter-intuitively, not to act at all. If we are patient before death, we do not startle forward to hold on to what we imagine it is about to seize from us (the particular iterations of Life, whether our own or of those we love); on the contrary, we relinquish a certain jealous ownership of ourselves as agents to realize that all of what we consider agency in our lived experience is grounded in a passive relation to this “death we’re lengthy at.”

Dickinson sketches the affective dynamics at work in this kind of patience in “The Manner of its Death,” a poem written in the year of her letter to the Norcross sisters, in which she muses that “The Manner of its Death / When certain it must die— / ‘Tis deemed a privilege to choose” (468) We are never given a clear sense of who or what the “it” signifies, except that it is alive, and here is faced with necessity: when a life is certain that it will die, it regards the power to choose its own manner of death as a privileg to choose” (468) We are never given a clear sense of who or what the “it” signifies, except that it is alive, and here is faced with necessity: when a life is certain that it will die, it regards the power to choose its own manner of death as a privileg. But if life is indeed “dying we’re lengthy at,” a life is always certain not only that it will die, but that it is always and already engaged in that dying. When confronted with these necessities, Dickinson suggests, we see the power to choose and to reach beyond necessity as the mark of power. The second stanza overturns the emphasis on choice in the first: “When Choice of Life—is past— / There yet remains a Love / Its little Fate to stipulate” (468). In other words, when we can no longer choose to continue living—when we are faced with the insurmountable necessity of dying—there is an affective charge (“a Love”) that remains to determine the fate of the life that has expired. Unlike in the first stanza, where the power to choose the conditions under which we die is only
“deemed” a privilege, there is here a power that persists after the resignation of life to necessity. It is noteworthy that the power that shapes the fate of this resigned life is “a” love. The indefinite article suggests that the love that Dickinson has in mind is impersonal inasmuch as it is not defined in terms of belonging or direction, yet it exerts a real effect on what this resigned life (this life that is no longer really distinct from its death) can do, or, more properly, mean. I want to suggest that this love is a figure for the kind of affectivity that emerges out of the ethos of patience toward death. Far from our ordinary, sentimental notions of love, what Dickinson is describing is instead the product of reflection on how deeply we are determined by external causes and how dependent we are, by extension, on how others affect us. To live without the fear of death is to lead a life that has an entirely different sense or meaning, a different way of conceiving its place in the world than one that fears ceding control to death. It is in this limited sense that we can say that a kind of love resulting from patience impacts the fate of the life in question—this love is determined by necessity and it is a kind of freedom from fear, but it is by no means a freedom of the will. Indeed, the relationship between affect and freedom in Dickinson’s ethos of patience is complicated. In her letter of April, 1862, Dickinson sings of death from “off charnel steps” and feels the influx of joy, the expansion of her life as a power to act—but this action does not derive, in the first place, from agency or any action grounded in it; it derives instead from patience, from an acquiescence to the inevitable action of death upon us. Dickinson, like Emerson, divorces the freedom that comes to us from Life (the “stupendous” and expansive quality of our power to be) from any readily identifiable concept of agency. This freedom is no act of will, but a willingness to perform oneself, one’s fate, in a paradoxical act of patience—indeed, an active patience. It is by a similar threading of the needle between freedom and necessity that Spinoza frames his theory of knowledge, and by this logic it is also possible to
see Dickinson’s affirmation of the vital power of singing “off charnel steps” as a form of poetic patience.

From Emerson and Dickinson we can observe that there was already an acute sensitivity to the affective dynamics of death among American writers in the nineteenth century; furthermore, these dynamics could provide the basis for a revision of the tendency to associate subjectivity with free will and activity—a revision that we will also see in the modernist death writers. For both writers, there is no real contemplation of life or death in themselves. One can speak, with Emerson or Dickinson, of a life that is also a death, an activity that performs itself patiently. The terms escape their isolation—they are fugacious, circular, monistic. There is no pure life or death, but only fluctuations in a single vital principle.

III. Hope, Fear, and the Stylization of Death in Nightwood

I have sketched the ethos of patience that emerges from a death-aware and Spinoza-informed reading of Emerson and Dickinson, and am tempted here to suggest that the Barnes of Nightwood receives it in the manner of a literary inheritance, that she treats it as one at the end of a long family line treats a precious heirloom: carefully, loyally, but in a drastically different manner, as the product of a bygone age, even if one worthy of being preserved. Indeed, the literature of the Transcendentalist milieu was significant in Barnes’s family, her father Wald being so enamoured of Thoreau, for instance, that he turned to Walden for parenting inspiration (Herring 34). Barnes was also known to have read Spinoza’s philosophy during the period when T. S. Eliot helped her to edit Nightwood for publication (Herring 219), as I explore later. By tempering this unusual combination of influences—the optimism of Transcendentalism, the
elaborately stylized morbidity of the Decadents, and the modernist pessimism of Eliot—with Spinoza’s philosophy, Barnes was well-equipped to articulate a vital approach to hopelessness.

A brief examination of this context will bring us a step closer to posing the question of what Barnes adds to the exploration of death and to the ethos of patience that I outline earlier. Two events intervene between the age of Emerson and Dickinson and that of Barnes that burn death into the public imagination and make of it a beacon around which the competing pessimisms and optimisms of the early twentieth century orient themselves. These events, which I have already treated to some degree, are the First World War and the outbreak of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. Though it is hardly more than a truism to claim that the war of 1914-1918 left an indelible mark on those who lived through those years, we nevertheless have to contend with the memory of the war years in order to discuss the treatment of death in the following decades. As a number of scholars have noted, death hangs over the so-called “high modernism,” which crystallized as an aesthetic and literary movement in the English-speaking world as the British and American publics were grappling with the scale of the violence that they had witnessed. Curiously, one of the consistent features of these accounts of death in the era of modernism is that a great many modernist novelists—from E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf to Willa Cather and William Faulkner—tended to displace the spectre of war deaths into the peripheries of their works. Death could be elided into circular, self-reflexive formal and narrative devices (Friedman, Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise), and it could be the occasion for explorations of the traumatized silence that often marked those who had experienced the bloodshed of war first-hand (James, The New Death: American Modernism and World War I), but death seldom comes into focus in its own right. I have earlier characterized death as a translucence and as a fugacious object of representation—that is to say, we can see it only by
seeing through it, and thus by seeing other objects in a death-coloured light. The aesthetic responses to the First World War tend to affirm this fugacity, but pair it with a sense of the utter novelty of modern death. Pearl James borrows the phrase “the new death” from the war-time religious writer Winifred Kirkland in order to describe this novel experience (1). Indeed, as I have suggested in previous pages, many modernists viewed the sheer scale of wartime death as indicative of the decay of modern life and the regard given to it. Life had, for such modernists as Eliot and Pound, become death-like. And while Eliot’s portrayal of London Bridge as a path of lost souls and Pound’s choice to begin the Cantos with a version of Odysseus’s descent into the underworld are not intrinsically modernist, the pessimism implied in those literary choices is. While Emerson might allude to Dante in “Experience” as a means of evoking the stupefying power of grief, in Emerson it is ultimately the figure of the underworld that is recuperated into the world of the living; in Eliot and Pound, we encounter aspirations to discover another world—to restore the Waste Land, or to ascend from Hades—but we are deprived of any solid hope that these recuperations can succeed. We are left in a position that is intractable by virtue of remaining caught up in the vicious circle of hope and fear that Spinoza criticizes in the Ethics. In the shadow of the new death, modernists like Pound and Eliot lost the power to be without hope, not because they were optimists, but precisely because the fear motivating their pessimism could not help but suggest a desire, even if a futile, exhausted one, to hope, to dispel the deathly quality of modern life.

If the literary élites of the modernist movement often voiced an overbearing pessimism, even a fear, in the face of a war-scarred modernity, there was nevertheless a significant counterweight in the popular discourse on longevity that emanated from the American medical community and which was shaped in part by the speculation of ambitious doctors like Smith and
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Chapin. In contrast to the pessimism of the new death, these figures, whom I have touched upon earlier, optimistically promised a new life. Of course, this discourse too failed to escape the circle of hope and fear insofar as it pins its hopes so definitively on a version of progressive humanism: with enough medical and technological expertise and advancement, death itself may die. It is perhaps indicative of the instability of the relationship between hope and fear—its susceptibility to reversal and oscillation—that the discourse of the indefinite deferral of death by technological means could emerge so seamlessly and with such apparent obliviousness to its own limitations from a broader medical discourse that had seemed so overwhelmed during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. Indeed, there has until recently been a general reticence about the ravages of the flu, which Elizabeth Outka christens “the second great traumatic event of the early twentieth century,” in the literary and historical writing about the period (938). In his account of the pandemic, Alfred W. Crosby observes that “[o]f the best selling college texts in the United States history, books by such historians as Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., C. Vann Woodward, and Carl Degler, only one so much as mentions the pandemic” (315). The modernists too rarely wrote of the pandemic, though it had carried off as many as 675,000 Americans and infected as much as a quarter of the entire population of the United States (Yerxa, “American Pandemic: An Interview with Nancy K. Bristow” 27). Many modernists in America and abroad were directly affected by the outbreak. John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner, and Eliot had all either suffered the flu themselves or had known those who died, though the pandemic hardly registers in their writing except in passing; H. D., Katherine Anne Porter, and D. H. Lawrence, among others, nearly lost their lives (Crosby 315-16; Outka 938). For these writers—many of whom served in the Great War, trained for service, or were en route to the front when the war
concluded, and all of whom were aware of the magnitude of the war—the Spanish flu appeared merely as part and parcel of the larger carnage of the war years. The pandemic was, as Outka has put it, “the shadowed twin to the war” (938). Just as Friedman and James have argued that the modernists tended to express the trauma of the war years by elision or by conspicuous silence, Outka argues that “[t]o depict the flu, authors had to record the gaps as well as the atmosphere that those gaps produced” (957).

For medical professionals, though, especially those who treated flu patients or were involved in public health planning, it would have been impossible not to note the specificity of the Spanish flu pandemic—its deadliness, its tremendous scale, and, one would think, the rebuke that it embodied to the most optimistic, utopian impulses of modern medicine. And yet, the discourse of public health planners like Smith and Chapin was in some ways born from the nation-wide efforts by the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) to organize and coordinate various local health administrations against the threat of the flu (Yerxa 28). If Chapin’s conviction that modern medicine and the American Public Health Association could eventually conquer death was grand to say the least, it was in part because he shared in a popular perception that the budding public health movement had succeeded, in the desperate years of 1918-19, in conquering the flu and in proving the efficacy of modern medicine to respond to health crises of enormous scale (Cassedy 15). Though the impact of the flu was “severe enough to lower life expectancy for Americans in 1918 by twelve years” and played, albeit quietly, into the fears of the high literary culture of the period that the progressivism of past ages was being

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46 William Carlos Williams was the rare figure in whom medical expertise and modernist literary commitments overlapped. Even he, though, appears to have given little shrift to the Spanish flu pandemic. Crosby recounts that “Dr. William Carlos Williams made up to 60 calls a day during the pandemic, but drew little from his battles with the flu for his art. The pandemic apparently struck him as just as irrelevant to the course of life and art as it did most Americans who were neither physicians nor poets” (316).
mocked by death and human fragility, for a much larger segment of the population, and for many in the medical community, the flu pandemic could be seen as the instigator of a genuine national project (Yerxa 28). The fearful pessimism shared by many modernist writers had its opposite in a popular optimism that, far from feeling that progressivism had become an empty promise, instead discovered new grounds for being hopeful. Between the popular and the high literary discourses on death—between the hopeful and the fearful, the optimistic and the pessimistic—there ran few lines of communication; yet as complementary responses to the “new death,” both are susceptible to the Spinozan critique that hope and fear are a single Janus-faced concept and that no tenable relationship to death can be had between them.

*Nightwood* is an attempt to grapple with the affective problem of death without resolving it into pessimism or optimism and thus foreclosing the issue. Death hangs over the novel, one in which curiously few characters actually die. It is not concerned with specific instances of dying, but rather with death as a concept; however, just as hope and fear are only quasi-concepts and can only be spoken of together, death remains a quasi-concept so long we treat it merely as an anti-life. I earlier asked what force of necessity compels Barnes to write about death; to my mind, it is the desire to be rid of the binary option—pessimism or optimism, hope or fear, the denial of death or the denial of life—that motivates *Nightwood* insofar as it is a piece of death writing. Barnes is driven to seek in her own writing what we might, for lack of better words, call the liveliness of death, and she is compelled to do so not simply because of a literary inheritance from Emerson and Dickinson—an *ethos* of patience and a sense of the singularity of life and death—but, more operatively, because the age lacked it. Barnes’s novel strives to avoid succumbing to the easy consolation of hope and the debilitation of fear while pursuing a joyful relation toward death, even if it does so while wearing the stage mask of tragedy. And yet, it is
essential not to see Barnes as a neutral party seeking a synthesis between the popular and the high literary understandings of death. There is a fundamental asymmetry in her relationship to the two discourses, given her own high literary pedigree. During the writing of *Nightwood*, Barnes became something of a protégée of T. S. Eliot, whose support ensured the novel’s publication with Faber and Faber in 1936 after Barnes had met with a string of rejections (Herring 226). Barnes is certainly much closer to the sphere of Eliot than she is to any figures who might represent the popular optimism of the public health movement. It is thus important to understand that *Nightwood* does not occupy any kind of middle ground: it is not by mediating between hope and fear, optimism and pessimism, that the novel manages to escape their circularity. What makes Barnes’s accomplishment so noteworthy is that she displaces the problem altogether. Where the optimist sides with life over death and denies the necessity of the latter, the pessimist would like to side with life, but finds no grounds for doing so; further still, she finds that life is everywhere as ashen as death. Owing to her own participation in the modernist milieu, Barnes develops her response out of its style and so adopts the language and the pose of melancholy. The essential difference, though, is that Barnes vitalizes death; there is

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47 It remains a topic of debate whether or not Barnes is best described as a modernist, a decadent, or something else. Danzer sees decadence as one of the means by which Barnes “transcends classic English modernism” (256), while David Weir sees Barnes as a modernist whose foremost modernist gesture is that she took decadence and “made it new through the deployment of narrative and poetic devices [which] have their origins in the literature of decadence” (187). Jane Marcus sees *Nightwood* as belonging to a “modernism of marginality.” Joseph Allen Boone argues that the novel’s queerness and its hostility to categorization prevents it from being assimilated into the modernist canon (233), while Brian Glavey suggests that “*Nightwood’s* queerness and its modernism must be understood together” (749). All of this is to say that the question of *Nightwood’s* relationship to modernism is a fraught one whose complexities should be kept in mind.

48 In the wake of the pioneering feminist readings that set the stage for much of the Barnes revival of the 1990s (see especially Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Women’s Circus Epic”), the status of T. S. Eliot in relation to Barnes has been hotly debated. Though that debate is not central to my own argument, the work of Miriam Fuchs (“Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot: Authority, Resistance, and Acquiescence”) and Georgette Fleischer (“Djuna Barnes and T. S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics of *Nightwood*”) is worth consulting for a fuller picture of the Barnes-Eliot relationship, as is Chapter Eleven of Phillip Herring’s biography *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*.

49 Danzer recounts in her article on Barnes’s decadent and surrealist influences that Guido Bruno, a publisher with *Pearson’s Magazine*, once remarked of Barnes that “[h]er morbidity is not a pose. It is as sincere as she is herself” (242). The sense of posing or performing that I invoke here is to my mind distinct from that which Bruno suggests.
no longer any tenable distinction in *Nightwood* between death and life, but only a death that is itself alive, a death that is a function of the Life that enfolds it. Put differently, Barnes infuses the language of pessimism with joyful affect. It is a performance that cannot be reduced to an epistemological question—the matter of what is true or false is irrelevant. It is not a matter, again, of the mask and the face, but rather the mask of the face. Thus, while I readily acknowledge that there is much pessimistic language in *Nightwood* and that Barnes herself was frequently read by her contemporaries as melancholic or pessimistic, I reject what Danzer sees rather straightforwardly as Barnes’s “radical nihilism and profound pessimism” (239). Instead, I read *Nightwood* as a Spinozan critique of the binary structure that opposes life and death, hope and fear, and, by extension, optimism and pessimism.

Phillip Herring, Barnes’s biographer, is somewhat closer to my position on the question of pessimism in *Nightwood* when he remarks that in the novel “only Matthew O’Connor […] can sufficiently transcend suffering to construct a *metaphysics of pessimism*, which, for all its rambling, does make a coherent statement about life” (207, my italics). Nowhere does *Nightwood* make more of a spectacle, more of a self-conscious pose, of pessimism than in the monologues of Dr. O’Connor, who performs pessimism, but not for its own sake—not, in other words, as a pessimist. And yet, the doctor’s “metaphysics of pessimism” cannot properly be said to “transcend” suffering; to my mind, it is that *Nightwood* refuses to transcend suffering or to dissolve the anxiety about death in any final figure of transcendence that marks it as a

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When I say that Barnes adopts the pose of melancholy, I am not referring to a simple act of pretending, as I will clarify later. Bruno speaks of Barnes’s morbidity as being other than a pose precisely because she means it. Posing is thus implicitly an epistemological problem, a question of duplicity. When I invoke posing and performance throughout this chapter, I refer to what I have earlier called an act of ontological constitution—nothing is true or false; that which would be judged epistemologically “false” is here only a mode of invented being that has no essential referent, no primary mode that is not already a sort of pose. An imperfect analogy is Jean-Paul Sartre’s declaration that human “existence precedes essence” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 20). For Sartre, there is no particular human nature to which we conform; rather, we make up that nature as we go along, by our actions.
tremendously important piece of death writing. O’Connor must be understood as a late
development of a longer lineage of decadent characters such as Huysmans’s Des Esseintes (À
Rebours) and Wilde’s Dorian Gray (The Picture of Dorian Gray), whose stylized performances
of their own lives incorporate figures of the “unnatural” (artifice in Huysmans, or hedonism in
Wilde) into lived experience. O’Connor is a character in whom life and death, and, indeed,
fabulation and reality, are wholly inseparable. In addition to pessimism, he also “performs”
medicine as a gynecologist, though he is not a licensed practitioner (Nightwood 38). He is, then,
the closest thing we have in Nightwood to a representation of the medical discourse whose
progressive optimism informed the death-denying efforts of Smith, Chapin, and others; unlike
these, however, O’Connor is a sort of chiasmus between life and death in which the one cannot
be separated from the other. He delivers children (“I helped to bring you into the world,” he
exclaims to Nora Flood, Robin Vote’s jilted lover, when we are first introduced to her) and he
performs abortions, although even this interwoven figure is legible only through a kind of role-
playing, since he is qualified to do neither (Nightwood 21).

Not only do life and death become inseparable and non-binary in O’Connor’s rambling
speeches, but so too do truth and falsehood, or being and appearing. Louis Kannenstine
appropriately describes O’Connor as a “paradox on all levels, an embodiment of the mystery of
intermediate being,” a character who the reader is “never allowed to take […] at face value”
though his is the lens through which much of the novel must be interpreted (110-11). And yet,
we are never quite allowed to dismiss him, either. Nightwood’s pretenders—and there is a wide
cast of them, from the cross-dressing false doctor O’Connor to the circus of pretend aristocrats in
the first chapter—do not live in what we might commonly understand as a false world. On the
contrary, their pretending is a mode of constitution: O’Connor does not pretend to be a doctor,
*per se*; rather, he is a doctor pretending. Likewise, though we cannot quite take the doctor seriously, it is equally true that we cannot bring ourselves to dismiss him—his pretending, his hyperbolic speeches, his pronouncements on the nature of death, all stake their own claims to reality and structure the world of the novel in a particular way; they belong to the sense of the false that I have described above as ontologically constitutive. Deleuze declares of Nietzsche that “[t]he activity of life is like a *power of falsehood*, of duping, dissimulating, dazzling and seducing” (*Nietzsche & Philosophy* 102, my emphasis). The power in question is false insofar as it is without essence—it does not refer to any stable identity or referent—but it is real nonetheless. It is in striking this pose, in viewing life as that which must be performed, stylized, that O’Connor expresses the power of falsehood. In *Nightwood*, even Felix Volkbein—the unfortunate husband of the ever-escaping Robin and supposed baron, though his father was, unbeknownst to him, a descendent of Italian Jews—declares that “the doctor was a great liar, but a valuable liar. His fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten but imposing plan; some condition of life of which he was the sole surviving retainer” (33). In other words, in this novel full of characters who seethe melancholy and nurse innumerable psychological wounds from their encounters with Robin, it is only the doctor, the supreme articulator of those wounds and of that melancholy, who retains “some condition of life.” I see O’Connor articulating an alternative vision of life and death in his valuable, even vital lying—for him, there is only Life and the processes of composition and decomposition that are immanent to it. At one point he declares that “Day and night [figures of waking and sleep, or more broadly of life and death] are related by their division,” a phrase that echoes Dickinson’s image of death as “the hinge to life” from her letter to Hitchcock (*Nightwood* 87). The doctor supplies us with “lies”—ontological constitutions or poses in the register of the false-but-real—that make it possible to conceive of
death as one of these terms that are related precisely by their division in a genuinely vital process—death, again, is life’s counterpoint.⁵⁰ Through O’Connor, the novel attempts to pierce the stubborn dualisms—interiority and exteriority, artifice and nature, life and death—that make it impossible to take the affective problem of death seriously.⁵¹ More broadly, *Nightwood* treats death by way of what Sontag calls “stylization”: the self-conscious and purposeful performance of a distinction between “matter and manner, theme and form” (18). Barnes writes about death in the manner of something vital, energizing, empowering, and by performing the content of pessimism in the style of optimism, she makes a spectacle of the act of making the distinction at all. In “The Neobaroque in Djuna Barnes,” Monica Kaup identifies a similar performance of suffering in Barnes’s works, noting that “the lamentation in *Nightwood* […] is an extroverted rather than an introverted grief, a public display that shifts the emphasis from the tragic suffering itself (objectivism) to its expression and articulation (subjectivism and emotional appeal) […] In *Nightwood*, […] suffering is a spectacle” (106). Though I would hasten to qualify the somewhat

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⁵⁰ One might raise the objection that under this sense of the false, it would be possible to be anything at all, when clearly that is not the case. There seem to be no criteria for determining what kinds of being can be performed or constituted; however, if we think of the power of falsehood as a kind of pragmatics, this objection becomes less serious. One cannot constitute just any kind of being at all, but rather only what one is able to perform effectively—only, in other words, the kinds of being that the performer is able to make operative or effective. A valuable liar is one whose lie illuminates a potential alternative to her present state of affairs—someone whose lie “works” and can be inhabited by others. There is a pay-off, something to be gained or recognized as an effect of the lie. A bad liar wears the mask of her lie uncomfortably. While a valuable liar reorganizes what is true and can believe that reorganized world as true, a bad one is embarrassed by the lie she cannot quite believe. Put another way, not all lies are equally worth living, or equally capable of being lived. For a deeper picture of the implications of this neo-pragmatist approach to truth, see Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (82-83) on the pragmatics of language and Brian Massumi’s *Semblance and Event* on “speculative pragmatism” (29-37).

⁵¹ While this combination of positions—hostility to dualism, a rejection of *mimesis* as the basis of art, and the collapse of appearing into being—is often categorized as “post-modern,” I want to push back against that classification here, since it obscures the fact that these aesthetic positions were quite contemporary with Barnes’s writing. In 1931’s *Art As Experience*, for example, John Dewey criticizes theories of art that propose dualisms between subject and object, the real world and the world of the art work, and, most importantly for my purposes here, between playfulness and seriousness. “No one has ever watched a child intent in his play,” writes Dewey, “without being made aware of the complete merging of playfulness with seriousness” (291). There is for Dewey a continuity between the child’s play and the artist’s work that cannot be set in opposition. Since Barnes’s erasure of the appearing-being distinction has precedents in the aesthetics of the 1930s—to say nothing of its precedents in Spinoza’s nominalist epistemology—there is no need to read her under such convoluted rubrics as proto-post-modernism.
tidy distinction between the objective and subjective registers in this picture of Barnes, I follow
Kaup unreservedly in underscoring the primacy of performance, or what I have preferred to call
stylization or fabulation, in Nightwood’s treatment of pain and, ultimately, of death.

In stylizing death, Barnes picks up on the same strain of death writing that includes
Emerson’s transfiguration of the relationship between death and knowledge in “Experience.”
These works, dissimilar in almost every superficial way, have much in common in their
examination of death, right down to their common invocation of Dante—after all, how else are
we to understand the “nightwood” of the novel’s title except as an allusion to the “dark wood”
the precedes the descent into the underworld at the beginning of the Inferno? Further still,
O’Connor at one point gives his full, conspicuous title as “Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-
Dante-O’Connor,” emphasizing not only his role as a Dante figure, but also the fact that this role
is fabulated, stylized, performed (87). There is no primary or “real” identity underlying his
performance, but only a being-in-the-making that we must take, as it were, with a grain of salt
(87). In Decadent Culture in the United States, David Weir suggests that Barnes invokes Dante
in her title in order to “[elevate] the darkness and degradation conventionally associated with sin
and error through a positive valorization of various negatives. Stated more simply, Nightwood
affirms negation” (185). While this characterization is helpful as far as it goes, it seems to me
that it holds only as long as we are careful not to understand the affirmation of negation as the
Hegelian “negation of negation,” or the dialectical moment of sublation. If this were the case, we
would risk slipping again into the vicious circle of hope and fear, the endless collapsing of
negative and positive affects into one another in the contemplation of some future event. The
novel would be little more than a mediation between these two poles, a representation of the one
to the other—could it then tell us anything other than that we mistook a potentially joyful affect
for a sad one, that we were incorrect in our judgments of what is positive and what is negative?

We risk finding ourselves stuck in a question about ultimate values (what is really good, and what truly deleterious?) when the question is, properly speaking, transcendental (under what conditions would it be possible for the idea of death to be other than a source of sadness?).

Perhaps more gravely, this understanding would also posit *Nightwood* as one more example of a type, yet one more decadent inversion of the traditional values attached to the sinful and the beautiful. It gives us no insight into what distinguishes the decadence of *Nightwood* from that of *À Rebours*, from the poetry of Baudelaire, or from Wilde’s plays. All that is to say that Weir offers us a helpful starting point, but not a method, and one must be cautious to make the distinction.

In the interest of that caution, I would prefer to say that *Nightwood* uses decadence as a means of affirming the hopeless rather than the negative. To explore what *Nightwood* gives to our efforts to think about the fugacious object of death, we must understand its stance toward it, that is, how it frames its own relation to death. My analysis of *Nightwood* thus functions as the first of two necessary steps in the study of death writing. This step is the interrogation of the nature of the constitution of the fugacious subject of decadence. We have already seen that O’Connor activates an ontologically constitutive power of the false (the first principle of the *ethos* of patience: life as decadence or style), but what kind of being is it that can be performed or stylized in this way? The second element of my analysis, which I will take up when I turn to Schwartz and Stevens, involves what I have called the affective problem of death—in what ways does literature suggest that we could think of death without either falling prey immediately to the sad affects or, more perniciously, deceiving ourselves that death may never come (either because
it could be eliminated from life, or because an afterlife awaits us)? In other words, how, finally, do we escape the circle of hope and fear that Spinoza critiques? Is it true, as Spinoza puts it, that “a free man [sic] thinks of death least of all things,” or is there a relation to our own demise, or to demise in general, that can affect us with joy? Is there, after all, a joy of the hopeless?

One of the defining features of the ethos of patience that I earlier located in Emerson and Dickinson is impersonality, or, put another way, the disruption of the essentialist model of the subject as an interiority or locus of agency defined by its self-enclosure from other subjects. This ethos is a necessary step toward sustaining a hopeless relation to death insofar as such a relation must acknowledge the ubiquity and immanence of death, the perpetual breaking-down of everything that seems solid and unitary. What I call “patience” is a recognition that even our subjectivity, the form of our experience, is subject to this ongoing, impersonalizing breakdown; the external, impersonal relations that constitute what we often understand as personality is forever changing without our knowing, often in ways that are impervious to our agential intervention. It is by presuming a patient subject, an impersonality without primary essence, that O’Connor can charge his stylizations with ontological import. The impersonal subject is one whose interiority is only an epiphenomenon of its external relations—its inmost qualities are determined only from without, by the milieu of relations in which it is embedded. Emerson most directly undercuts the interiority model by imagining the subject not as an individual or as one who chooses, but rather as a “train of moods,” a series of affections determined from without.

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52 Though I treat the notion of an afterlife quite brusquely here, it strikes me that the theological dimension of that issue—namely, the question of whether or not there is a literal afterlife—is irrelevant to the kind of thinking about death that I am suggesting. The atheist has no special exemption from the circle of hope and fear for rejecting religious principles, nor the theist for accepting them. What I am treating is not a matter of the a priori principles that condition how we understand our experiences, but the experiences themselves; in other words, I take it for granted that the theist and the atheist are each susceptible to specific and singular experiences of dread and uncertainty when considering death, to which hope and fear are the readiest responses. The question of one’s stance toward death is a live philosophical—and, I am arguing, literary—issue, regardless of one’s professed beliefs.
Nightwood also suggests that the interiority model of the subject is untenable, but it also suggests that interiority cannot simply be dispelled; we cannot simply point to that model, denounce its insufficiency, and move on as open subjects. If for Emerson interiority resolves into a string of impersonal, exterior “moods,” for Barnes it remains partially unresolved; it retains a problematic status whose complexities are perhaps more effectively explored in fiction, which can portray not only the mediation and collision of various fictitious interiorities, but the exteriority in which these relations occur, than in Emerson’s essayistic form. Nowhere is interiority more problematic in Nightwood than for a subject such as O’Connor, whose “conversations” with other characters are little more than extemporaneous speeches on the nature of death, among other things. For the interior, broadly Cartesian, subject, death is the event that suggests an absolute limit of interiority—when death has at last occurred, there is no longer a subject; there is no such thing as a subject who cannot die, who does not have it in its power, so to speak, to cease being. Thus, death is quite precious to the interior subject. “[D]eath,” declares O’Connor late in the novel, “is intimacy walking backward” (137). For the interior subject that imagines itself self-contained and free, it is the power to continue being and the promise that there remains always one final choice, one guarantee of the power of agency—the choice to die—even though that very precious choice is one that, if ever acted upon, would dissolve the subject altogether.

Nightwood is in a sense an attempt to reconcile the interior subject’s apprehensions about death,

53 Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died” (465) can be understood in this sense, as an illustration of the moment when death obliterates the interiority of the subject.
54 The question of the intimacy of death to the subject, or of death as a kind of power of the subject, has been widely discussed in various traditions of phenomenology, both in support of and as a challenge to the interior subject. On the preciousness of death, see Camus’s declaration in The Myth of Sisyphus that “death and the absurd are […] the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live” (60). Also consider Heidegger’s definition of “Being-towards-death” as “Being towards one’s ownmost potentiality-for-Being,” that is, as the awareness that death is the very condition of our existence as subjects (Being and Time 299). Blanchot has also considered death at length in the fourth chapter of The Space of Literature, which poses the following as one of its operative questions: “Have I the power to die?” (98).
its entrapment in the circle of hope and fear, with a metaphysical picture of death, painted in Spinozan hues, that demands we rethink the subject in impersonal, exterior terms.

Even as the doctor voices this speculative metaphysics, Barnes shows that personality, interiority, is always a tempting, perhaps inerasable, position, a problem to be grappled with and taken seriously rather than hand-waved away in some figure of transcendence. Even the doctor, though he has been for much of the novel the mouthpiece of impersonality as a stance toward death, slips back into the circle of hope and fear, into optimism and pessimism. In “Go Down, Matthew,” the penultimate chapter, O’Connor discusses Robin with Nora, the lover she has abandoned, and asks, “Is there no bread that does not come proffered with bitter butter? I, as good a Catholic as they make, have embraced every confection of hope, and yet I know well, for all our outcry and struggle, we shall be for the next generation not the massive dung fallen from the dinosaur, but the little speck left of a hummingbird” (163, my emphasis). The doctor has known the theological hope that Catholicism promises, of a final undoing of death in the afterlife, the hope of a world in which all is preserved and remembered; however, it has failed to convince him that he, or anyone, will be remembered as anything more than waste—not remarkable waste that might provoke the interest of archaeologists, but waste that will go unnoticed by generations to come. This is not quite a pessimism, but it is a Spinozan rejection of either hope or denial as means of solving what I have termed the affective problem of death, even if it does not amount to a solution to that problem in its own right.

As Barnes shows at the end of the chapter, though, there is a perilously thin line between sustaining oneself between hope and fear, on the one hand, and collapsing into these affects, on the other. By the end of the chapter, the doctor has fallen into a drunken rage and rants of the futility of living to an ex-priest in a bar. As he struggles to leave, he weeps: “I’ve not only lived
my life for nothing, but I’ve told it for nothing—abominable among filthy people—I know, it’s all over, everything’s over, and nobody knows it but me […] the end—mark my words—now nothing, but wrath and weeping!” (175). We swing in the space of the doctor’s ramblings from the equivocation of hope, which obscures the finitude of individual lives behind a screen of perpetuity (life will overthrow death, or even that we will live on at the very least in the memory of others), to the affective paralysis of the fear of death: intoxicated by despair as much as alcohol, the doctor stumbles and is barely able to walk on his own behalf. Here it is the doctor’s obsessive fixation on the very finitude of life that was obscured by hope that subjects him to the fear of his own meaninglessness. As sad affects wash over him, the doctor becomes more and more fixated on his self-enclosed personality, emphasizing that only he possesses privileged knowledge of the emptiness of life; at the same time, his drunkenness in a sense de-composes the relations that constitute him: though he is nominally addressing the ex-priest, the address has become increasingly solipsistic, a kind of soliloquy in the presence of others. While this scene, which is the last in the novel involving O’Connor, seems to give much ammunition to those who would read Nightwood as definitively pessimistic, I take it instead as only cautionary; here, O’Connor’s performance functions as Barnes’s warning to the reader, and thus also as a necessary first step in analyzing what can be gained from studying the character of the doctor, though it is sequentially the last time we encounter him in Nightwood. Through O’Connor’s example, Barnes shows us that the effort to escape the affective problem of death is perilous and we should not think that literature offers us any viable transcendence of that problem; in other words, if we have perhaps hoped for O’Connor to solve for us this problem that cannot finally be solved, the doctor’s final scene is there to remind us that the fruits of hope are, like those of fear, mere “wrath and weeping.” However, I do not take this final scene as an indication that the
doctor has nothing to offer us in an effort to think through death; his backsliding into the circle of hope and fear indicates just how pernicious and difficult that circle is, but it does not invalidate his efforts in the rest of the novel to offer us an alternative. What I mean to say is that it is not because he is hopeless that the doctor ends up so broken and enraged; on the contrary, it is because he could not continue to be hopeless. Hopelessness is not an impossible position as such, but it is a difficult one to maintain.

With the above caveats in mind, we can begin to work backward in order to understand what O’Connor offers us as a figure of hopelessness. In order to understand him fully in this light, though, we need to examine a curious remark in Barnes’s correspondence from the period she spent revising _Nightwood_. From 1933 to 1936, Barnes lived in New York’s Greenwich Village and struggled to adapt the novel in a way that would appeal to publishers, most of whom were highly skeptical of it (Herring 218). This was a formative period for _Nightwood_, which received its most substantial revisions under Eliot’s advice in 1936. Herring notes that while Eliot saw O’Connor as “a central consciousness” of the novel and encouraged Barnes to foreground him, he also insisted that his monologues be condensed so as not to overwhelm the rest of the novel (226, 230). At the same time that Barnes was receiving Eliot’s editorial advice, she read a wide range of philosophy and theology, including works by William James, Montaigne, Martin Luther, and Blaise Pascal (Herring 219). In a letter to her confidante Emily Coleman dated June 26th, 1935, Barnes shares her judgment on one of the philosophers she had been reading: “Theres [sic] a man who got into his own mind and ran around in it trying to find cover and a way out” (qtd. in Herring 219). The philosopher in question was Baruch Spinoza.\(^55\)

\(^55\) I have not been able to examine the letter personally and Herring does not mention which text of Spinoza’s Barnes had read, nor which translation (assuming that she did not read it in Latin), though there were a number of options in circulation at the time. If Barnes is indeed referring to the *Ethics*, the likeliest candidates are the widely reprinted
Readers of Spinoza may well find him unrecognizable in this description; where many have remarked on the coolness, even the detachment of Spinoza’s writing, Barnes portrays him as almost comically frantic, perhaps even desperate. This description is significant for two reasons. First of all, it allows us to make an educated guess as to which text Barnes had been reading. Her reference to Spinoza’s trying to escape his own mind suggests that the particular work in question is the *Ethics*, which uses the infamously convoluted “geometric method” to organize its arguments. By framing his arguments in the manner of geometrical proofs, with definitions, axioms, postulates, propositions, and demonstrations, Spinoza sought to show that his conclusions followed necessarily and incontrovertibly from the principles they were based upon—in other words, the geometric method was Spinoza’s attempt to accomplish what Descartes sought to do by the mechanism of doubt: to escape the perils of mere subjectivism, to “find cover and a way out” from his own interiority. If Barnes is indeed referring to the *Ethics*, then it is plausible that she would have encountered Spinoza’s definition of the body as infinitely composite, his rejection of Cartesian dualism, and perhaps even the critique of hope that I have been referring to throughout this chapter. In any case—and it is best not to speculate too wildly here—the comment shows that she had encountered Spinoza’s thinking first-hand. The second reason that Barnes’s comment is important is that this version of Spinoza, the manic thinker desperately clamoring to escape the confines of his own mind, who constructs an elaborate machinery of thought with the purpose of delivering himself from himself, is conspicuously familiar. If it seems an unlikely description of Spinoza, it is a better description of *Nightwood*’s Dr. O’Connor, whose role Barnes was in the midst of revising as she ranged through the history editions of Elwes and White, both from the 1880s, and perhaps Andrew Boyle’s 1910 edition for Everyman’s Library, which included an introduction by George Santayana. The Boyle translation was published in New York and would have been the most recent at the time. See Boucher 1-6.
of philosophy. Barnes’s revisions not only respond to Eliot’s advice, but also bear the traces of her recent reading of Spinoza. These circumstances suggest that Barnes did not simply absorb Eliot’s advice, but tempered it with further reading, which in turn allow us to read Nightwood as advocating a kind of vital hopelessness rather than the modernist pessimism that one could have encountered in Pound or Eliot. Earlier in this chapter I compared Renan’s youthful analysis of decadence with the account he gives of the philosopher’s life on the second centenary of his death. I ended that discussion by wondering whether or not it is possible to think of Spinoza as a decadent. I now wonder instead whether or not Barnes has pre-empted me on that point by assimilating the figure of Spinoza, who Deleuze and others take as one of the great vitalist metaphysicians, into her portrayal of O’Connor. Just as I have argued that we might see death as life’s counterpoint, here we may see O’Connor as Spinoza’s: not as his opposite, nor, as Herring suggests, as a metaphysician of pessimism, but truly as Spinoza’s counterpoint, as one whose positions are deduced not from first principles of philosophy but from a speculative and artistic imagination, and whose vision of the singularity of life and death under the figure of Life itself is articulated not by refusing to think of death (“A free man thinks of death least of all things”), but by stylizing and performing it.

If we turn our attention to reading O’Connor in this way, as a sort of decadent Spinoza, we can start to see the pieces of the ethos of patience, of an impersonal approach to the subject and a hopeless approach to death fall into place. A few pages after we are first introduced to O’Connor, he tellingly muses to Nora about the sorrowful affects: “A man’s sorrow runs uphill; true it is difficult for him to bear, but it is also difficult for him to keep […] There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall! There are only confusions; about that you are quite right, Nora my child, confusions and defeated anxieties” (25, my italics).
These proclamations may be somewhat confusing on their own, until we read them alongside a conspicuously similar passage of Spinoza’s: “Affect, which is called animi pathema [passivity of the soul], is a confused idea by which the mind affirms of its body, or any part of it, a greater or less power of existence than before; and this increase of power being given, the mind itself is determined to one particular thought rather than to another” (Ethics III.Gen.Def.Aff). Affects, for Spinoza, always involve the mixture or interaction of two or more bodies, so that one body (or composite) is passive in relation to another group. An affect is confused insofar as we usually do not know a) what the composite of our body comprises and b) what composite of external bodies is affecting us; thus, the affects determine us to act and feel in specific ways, but we never know completely or precisely what kind of bodies are affecting us. Since affects determine how we feel and what range of actions we are capable of undertaking, it follows by definition that the subject has no interiority, or, rather, that its interiority is determined from the outset by its external relations. The subject may experience itself as a continuity that remains the same across time, but it is affected by a constant, subtle stream of changes. To that end, Spinoza understands death as nothing more or less than a qualitative change in the consistency of a series of relations—not as the wholesale breakdown of all relations. In the Ethics, he recounts the story of a Spanish poet who was afflicted with amnesia and subsequently forgot who he had been. The poet as he once was, Spinoza argues, had died; the pre- and post-amnesiac poet are different individuals (Ethics IV.P39S). Dying is a constant process, and death is only the disruption of whatever characteristics relation we reify as the individual subject. Returning to O’Connor, we can now reframe his claim that “[t]here is no pure sorrow” as a Spinozan acknowledgment of the

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56 I quote here from White’s 1883 translation rather than Shirley’s contemporary translation, given that White’s was both available to Barnes and more closely resembles the language that O’Connor uses.

57 See Deleuze’s discussion of Hume and relations that are external to their terms in Empiricism and Subjectivity.
exterior, impersonal nature of subjectivity that entails the immanence of death to life. Sorrow, like Spinoza’s general definition of the affects, is always a confusion—it always involves a particular combination of different bodies, or, in this case, of “lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall.” But we are not dealing with the general form of the affect; we are dealing with sorrow, with one of the sad, or limiting, affects. O’Connor indicates as much by claiming that a person’s sorrow “runs uphill”—it is difficult to withstand sorrow, difficult to act when one is affected by it, just as it is difficult to run uphill. Here O’Connor uses “sorrow” metonymically—a person’s sorrow is, strictly speaking, since there is no sorrow in itself, the person insofar as he or she is affected by sorrow. The affect determines what a body can do—but if sorrow is limiting and disempowering, it is also unstable and fleeting, which is to say that it is “difficult to keep.” In life, then, there are only these encounters that result in sorrow (limiting or disempowering encounters) and those that do not. If the result of an encounter is that sorrows are overcome, the result for Spinoza is joy since there would be an expansion of the power to act. The doctor, though, ever clothing his speculation in the language of the negative and the deathly, only names joyful affects by circumlocution: they are “defeated anxieties.” Nevertheless, he does not predicate subjectivity on self-enclosure; the subject is always more-than-one, always suspended among an array of relations.

If the doctor here fixates on sorrow, it is not an expression of the inherently sorrowful state of life that would make O’Connor a figure of modernist pessimism. In the next chapter, “La Somnambule,” he delivers another Spinoza-echoing insight into the passions, this time to Felix: “The breast we strike in joy is not the breast we strike in pain; any man’s smile would be consternation on another’s mouth […] Man has no foothold that is not also a bargain. So be it! Laughing I came into Pacific Street, and laughing I’m going out of it; laughter is the pauper’s
money. I like paupers and bums [...] because they are *impersonal with misery*” (35-36, emphasis mine). Echoing Spinoza’s argument about the amnesiac poet, O’Connor indicates that the breast struck in joy and pain are different because the affects alter us; they are the very ropes of relation that suspend us in existence. A change in our affective composition—say, a decomposition, or an experience of sadness—is a genuine difference not only in how we feel but in what we are, as feeling beings. My smile would not wear as a smile on the mouth of another because affect is intrinsically, thoroughly relational, and what affects me as joyful given the relations that I comprise would not necessarily affect another in the same way, since that other is a wholly singular bundle of relations. It is also in this sense we have “no foothold that is not also a bargain”: regardless of whatever stability we perceive in our own existence, whatever consistency we possess as living beings, that consistency is defined by the interplay of life and death, of relational compositions and decompositions. The pauper’s laughter, then, remains as a kind of crux. To what end does O’Connor invoke this figure? The pauper, first of all, is one who has in one sense or another been expelled to the margins of a broader social *milieu*. The sad affect of misery decomposes the relations between the pauper and society at large; the pauper is therefore isolated, less capable of acting, and more vulnerable to further decomposition. This is the negative sense of impersonality; however, there is another, more positive, sense of this impersonality, which requires a brief digression. Antonio Negri observes in *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo*, his Spinoza-inflected study of time and the multitude, that “poverty cannot turn in the void, it can only go forward, and to go forward means to go forward in common. Were we not to start out from poverty, we would not start out at all; that is to say, in this situation the production of being could occur or not occur, because the force that sustains and propels it would not be necessary” (195). Poverty, in other words, provides the basis from which all ontological
constitution must proceed; it supplies the necessary and sufficient conditions for producing the
world otherwise. Negri derives his reasoning here from Spinoza’s conception of freedom and
reason, which Deleuze paraphrases in the 1981 lecture I quoted from earlier in the chapter: “We
are not born free, we are not born reasonable. We are completely at the mercy of encounters, that
is: we are completely at the mercy of decompositions” ("Spinoza: 20/01/1981"). While the poor
according to Negri are those who have been the most deprived of the opportunity for freedom,
they are also the group in which the need for that freedom is most acutely felt. In that sense, all
freedom must proceed from poverty—from the existential desire, the conatus, of freedom.
Poverty, for Negri, is the transcendental condition that permits and makes freedom intelligible in
the first place.

Returning to Nightwood, we can use Negri’s discussion of poverty to show that the
positive sense of the impersonality that O’Connor admires in the figure of the pauper in fact
proceeds from the negative sense that I have already outlined. Having become a nobody to
everybody else, the pauper in Nightwood experiences his vulnerability to decomposition, her
awareness of the proximity of death to her life, as an imperative to laugh; laughter, after all, is an
affect easily shared. This is not what we would in any conventional sense call a joy of poverty,
just as we would never say that there is an outright joy in the face of death. It is instead a pursuit
of joy (in the technical sense of an empowering or positive affect) that aims to neutralize the sad

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58 I am eager to preempt any fears that I might be conflating irrationality with poverty. I follow Deleuze’s definition
of rationality, which is quite specific to Spinoza and should not be understood in any sense as meaning that the poor
cannot think clearly and distinctly, as one might expect under the more familiar Cartesian definition of rationality.
Deleuze, reading Spinoza, says that “I would call reason, or effort of reason, conatus of reason, effort of reason, this
tendency to select, to learn the relations, this apprenticeship of the relations which are composed or which are not
composed” ("Spinoza: 20/01/1981"). Thus, we are all, at the beginning, irrational, since we have not yet had enough
experiences to understand what affects us positively or negatively. Negri does not equate poverty with ignorance or
lack of knowledge, but instead suggests that no freedom can exist without there having first existed a state of
poverty that kindled and sustained the desire to compose new relations.
affects of an experience that may well never be recoverable for joy. Vulnerability and misery enable and necessitate this stratagem of laughter, but they are not its final word; if indeed there is no pure sorrow, and thus also no pure joy, then we must see the pauper’s laughter here as a joy conditioned by sorrow, but irreducible to it. Later in the chapter, an unnamed narrator says of Robin, as she kneels at the altar of a chapel, pregnant with Felix’s son, that “those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned” (51). In other words, those who refuse to understand life as intrinsically complicated between joy and sadness have no purchase on it. To be unaffected is to exist in utter non-relation. Thus, in the scene involving O’Connor and the pauper, laughter is the pauper’s means of actively pursuing affectivity, of joining in the bargaining of joy and sadness without which “[m]an has no foothold,” and the doctor, as if to adopt the pauper’s positive impersonality as a pose of his own, also adopts the pauper’s laughter.

Later, in “Watchman, What of the Night?”, the doctor further distinguishes between the impersonality that the subject actually is, and which has its own mode of death, and the interiority model of the subject, which conceives of its own death in personal terms. “To our friends,” the doctor says, “we die every day, but to ourselves we die only at the end. We do not know death, or how often it has essayed our most vital spirit” (103). For our friends, who have no purview into the interior continuity that we experience of ourselves, we “die” constantly—we are always changing, always altered by the decomposition of one set of relations, or perhaps by the new composition of others. A friend might recognize, for instance, that who we once were is no longer who we are; she might see that the familiar set of relations that give us consistency have decomposed over time and that we have, in a manner of speaking, died, like Spinoza’s Spanish poet. To ourselves, though, we tend not to understand ourselves as mere “habits of saying ‘I,’” as Deleuze calls them, and do not experience the various influx and efflux of affect
that might change us from day to day (Empiricism and Subjectivity x). Thus, if we limit ourselves to considering only our anticipation of death, there appears for us only a final death, the trap lying in wait. The doctor realizes, as Spinoza does, that the interior subject is secondary to the impersonal and external processes that determine that subject as an interiority, and that it is the imperceptible death, that which the doctor tells us we do not know personally, that marks out where “our most vital spirit” lies, or, in other words, the range of actions that we are capable of undertaking or living. Blanchot writes that “[d]eath exists not only, then, at the moment of death; at all times we are its contemporaries” (133). Death is, in a word, immanent, regardless of the way that our subjectivities habituate our expectations. In Nightwood, Nora credits the doctor with a similar observation: “You know what none of us know until we have died. You were dead in the beginning” (161). If we have at any moment the paradoxical “power” to die (to let our power lapse into impotence), it is not because we have the choice to avoid or embrace death, as the personal model of subjective agency would have it, but because we have always been suspended in this movement of composition and decomposition and because we have always been both point and counterpoint, alive and dead. To deny death with the optimists is to refuse one of the very powers that constitutes our being and we are no less flawed in denying death than the pessimist is in denying life.

We have seen, then, that O’Connor is a “valuable liar” and a stylist or fabulator of his own life, and that his fabulation is one of the means by which he affirms the vitality of his meditations on death. We have also seen, through a comparison of O’Connor and Spinoza, that O’Connor’s sense that we are, in the first instance, not self-enclosed identities or subjects but impersonal entities necessitates this fabulation and that it is the vulnerability to death, as well as our recognition of its intimacy to us, that instills an urgency in us to compose the kinds of
relations that would secure us to this world, as in O’Connor’s appropriation of the pauper’s laughter. It is death’s proximity, its immanence to our lives, that makes the lie or the stylization of life so valuable, insofar as it is through this posing that we strive to meet death without illusion or surrender—neither hopefully nor fearfully—but, strictly speaking, as beings who are hopeless, but who for all that are not without joy. Barnes portrays O’Connor as a kind of decadent Spinoza precisely to undermine this binary trap of hope or fear, which she witnessed around her in the context of popular optimism and Eliotic pessimism. The remaining task is to examine how Barnes’s participation in the Spinozan strain enables her to suggest an escape from what I have called the affective problem of death. In other words, how might literature address the problem that the thought of death will necessarily affect us with sadness, insofar as it amounts to conceiving of our own decomposition? The solution is not and cannot be a reversion to the figures of hope—it would be a sham, in other words, to say that decadence, or the impersonal subject’s stylization of its own process of dying, could simply convert the sadness of death into an aesthetic joy, a kind of sublimation. While I do not doubt that there is sublimation at work when an artist writes of death, I see the affective problem as being rather more deeply rooted than sublimation can address: since in sublimation we are either displacing or claiming to transcend an emotion, it would be altogether too hopeful—too death-denying—to point to sublimation as a way out of this problem. Pessimism, on the other hand, I take as self-evidently untenable—its result, as the arch-decadent Des Esseintes puts it in Huysmans’s À Rebours, is “an attitude of resignation and drift.” If it is not to be taken as a wholesale concession, pessimism is compelled to ironize itself (79). There is no doubt a certain power in being a poseur of resignation—in the paradoxical poise of the dandy slouched upon a divan, or in Robin Vote striking “the pose of her annihilation” when we first encounter her in Nightwood—and O’Connor
certainly recognizes this much (*Nightwood* 39). It is to Barnes’s credit that her work makes the rare effort to think death in its totality, neither to recuperate it nor to reject it, but to take it seriously as a problem that cannot be set aside or treated in so cavalier a way as even Spinoza sometimes does. In this sense she extends the efforts by Emerson and Dickinson to recuperate death as a source of vitality, but places greater emphasis on its problematic quality; though she follows these earlier writers in deriving an impersonal mode of subjectivity from death, she explores the specific practices of performance and stylization that could render the *ethos* of patience livable. Perhaps most importantly, Barnes explores these practices with close attention to the painstaking difficulty of living in this patient suspension between hope and fear. The free may think least of all of death, but this freedom is not granted easily. Barnes refuses to accept the platitudes, worn so smooth with overuse, that art has any power to transcend death and to deliver us this freedom at a pen-stroke.

To describe what Barnes makes visible for us in *Nightwood*, we could appropriate what Des Esseintes says of Baudelaire: “This writer […] possessed that remarkable quality, the power to define in curiously healthy terms the most fugitive and ephemeral of the unhealthy conditions of weary spirits and melancholy souls” (134). Many years later, in a late essay entitled “Literature and Life,” Deleuze writes that literature is “a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived” and, finally, “an enterprise of health” (1-3). If we frame our encounter with *Nightwood* in this way, and if death infuses the livable and the lived at every moment, then we might say that Barnes places us in the position to ask the following questions: How can we make a health of our inescapable awareness of death? How can we envision a mode of persisting in being that does not literally involve our persistence in the same form of being, but which exceeds the pale rhetorical palliative of promises such as our living on in the minds of
others? That Barnes poses these concerns to us via a doctor whose medical credentials are themselves mere poses suggests her skepticism that modern medicine, with its progressive, death-denying impulses, could help to solve these problems. Barnes’s effort to answer this question, to discover a properly hopeless role for art in the affective engagement with death, that defines the decadence of Nightwood. In order to extend this effort, I will turn now to Stevens and Schwartz in order to pose the question of health, which, as we shall see, immediately forces us to open a pragmatic question of knowledge: what purview do I gain from examining my own death?

IV. “The Aflatus of Ruin”: Life and Death in Schwartz and Stevens

Deep in the midst of one of his monologues in Nightwood, Dr. O’Connor volunteers a suggestive definition of the purpose of life: “Life, the permission to know death. We were created that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste” (90). In the context of Nightwood, this statement is one among many similarly suggestive, occasionally contradictory statements; the novel maintains no pretense of reconciling the doctor’s various metaphysical postulates, nor should we expect it to adopt one of these positions—rather, these poses—over the others. But this claim is particularly worth examining, since it links Nightwood to a strain of late modernist death writing most explicitly exemplified by the late works of Wallace Stevens and Delmore Schwartz. O’Connor’s definition isolates several stances toward death that are present in Nightwood, but which the novel does not explore in direct detail, since it is primarily concerned with enacting the fugacity of death; these stances, I believe, are more fully developed in Stevens and Schwartz. The first of these stances is that knowledge of death is one of the potential powers of life. It is only potential insofar as our lives grant us “the permission” to know death and not the guarantee of this knowledge. Permission is a potential—we may choose to
make use of it or we may not. The affective problem of death—the question of how to reject both hope and fear and instead make our own dying into a mode of health—must be approached on the terrain of knowledge and potentia. Even if death always involves the decomposition of our vital relations, perhaps there are modes of relation that are only possible if we include in them the idea of our own deaths. The second stance is that if we conceive life and death as a single potential knowledge, we must posit an underlying vitality—Life itself—as the immanent stratum which this process would be attempting to “know” in the first place. The permissive “life” that allows us to know death is human, concrete, and determinative, but the death that it is permitted to know cannot be. Death is impersonal, inhuman, and abstracting, and insofar as this is true it cannot itself be an object of knowledge (it is fugacious). Death is not something to be known at all, but rather it is the slippery surface which deflects our knowledge toward the pure excess that it expresses in the first place. I noted in an earlier discussion of Emerson that patient thinking means that I do not think my thoughts, but that, on the contrary, I am being thought. It is in this same sense that O’Connor can say that human beings were created “that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste.” This position is deeply Spinozan: Life, or substance, is infinite, but it cannot be given all at once, as a brute fact; the infinitude of existence is wholly meaningless unless we can account for the mechanisms by which it actualizes itself; thus, Life knows its own “inhuman taste” only because it is expressed through everything that thinks, because, as Deleuze writes of Spinoza, the infinite character of substance is “explicated” or unfolded in an infinity of finite modes (Expressionism in Philosophy 18, 22).59 What I will argue, even if only in an unavoidably cursory fashion, is that Stevens and Schwartz undertake as death

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59 Which, for Spinoza, is everything. As I remark in an earlier footnote, this position presumes the parallelism of the attributes (body and mind), which itself entails that everything possessing a body also possesses, in a certain sense, a mind, or, less awkwardly, that there is a mental correlate for everything that possesses a body.
writers a kind of baroque inversion of Spinoza’s metaphysics: where Spinoza’s *Ethics* deduces the immanence of substance in its expressions from the highest level of abstraction down, these writers use death as an abstractive theme that leads their poetic *personae* from concrete perceptions toward ever greater levels of abstraction through the contemplation of the vital immanence that death reveals. More importantly, though, they seek out ways of infusing this mode of expression—this contrapuntal Spinozism-in-reverse—with an affective charge.

Realizing that positing an underlying immanence is not enough, that this alone is unlikely to soothe the fear of death and should not be taken as grounds for any unrealistic hope, Schwartz and Stevens instead look for means of joy in the knowledge of death.

In the pages to follow, I will be discussing Schwartz and Stevens as parallel poets. In particular, I will be reading Stevens’s 1952 poem in memory of George Santayana, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” and Schwartz’s 1958 poem “Summer Knowledge.” Clearly, I have no pretensions of treating the subject of death exhaustively in either poet (a task that demands much more than a sub-section of a chapter); however, I do intend my readings as a demonstration that there is a live and vibrant strain of “hopeless” death writing that not only emerges alongside the habitually death-intrigued high modernism but persists even as high modernism ebbs into its various mid-century permutations\(^{60}\), and that this strain has deep roots in American literature. Furthermore, I contend that this strain of death writing is motivated by the encounters of a handful of American writers with the ideas, and sometimes the specific texts, of Spinoza—so much so, in fact, that this death writing is inseparable from the broader reception and adaptation

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\(^{60}\) A number of rubrics have been devised to describe this odd transitional period in 20\(^{th}\) century literature, including late modernism, proto-postmodernism, and, more recently, post-45 writing. Though I will be referring to the period in which Schwartz and the later Stevens are writing as belonging to “late modernism,” it should be noted that I do so only out of convenience and that the term is admittedly imprecise.
of Spinoza’s thinking that I have termed “the Spinozan strain.” There are a number of superficial reasons for studying these two poems together. They are both legible as meditations on death that, in the end, are also meditations on life. The poems are essentially contemporaneous, each poet conceived of the other as a “philosophical” or philosophically minded poet, and each admired the other’s work. The more significant resonance between these poets, at least for present purposes, is that they were both well enough aware of Spinoza’s thinking, either through direct or vicarious contact with his works, that it leaves an indelible mark on the way that their poems explore the relationship between death, knowledge, and affectivity.

Schwartz’s connections to Spinoza are surprisingly deep and, I would argue, formative of his approach to poetry. In 1931, Schwartz was a precocious eighteen-year old with an abiding interest in poetry and philosophy who had begun studying at the University of Wisconsin in September. He wrote frequently to his friend Julian Sawyer in New York City to receive news from home and to report on university life. In a letter dated October 1st, Schwartz complains that “an intellectual group” has already formed around him: “I pose the questions, am the authority, and the kind of influence (through speech, I mean) that I do not want to be: everyone (the nine or ten) is reading Spinoza” (6). This appears to be the earliest evidence that Schwartz was reading Spinoza; further still, the letter shows that he was widely enough associated with the philosopher

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61 This admiration, though, was not instant, and the dynamic between the two poets is quite complex, at least from Stevens’s side. In a 1940 letter to Leonard C. van Geyzel, Stevens writes that Schwartz “is not a poet; his field is philosophy. Schwartz’s studies have always been those of a young philosopher, but with an increasing interest in poetry” (Letters of Wallace Stevens 355-56). Fifteen years later, though, Stevens would include Schwartz’s name on a shortlist of poets to be considered for the Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize. Though he notes that Schwartz would probably be a better candidate for the award in a few years’ time, Stevens nonetheless remarks that Schwartz “seems to me to be the most gifted of all the younger men” (875). Schwartz, for his part, is consistently glowing in his praise of Stevens. Interestingly enough, though, in a review of Stevens’s 1954 volume of Collected Poems, Schwartz praises the elder poet by calling him a “philosophical poet” and a “poet of ideas”—the very qualities which Stevens, in 1940, saw Schwartz as having failed to integrate into one another (Schwartz, “In the Orchards of the Imagination” 188). The 1940 slight aside, it is clear that by the time Stevens wrote the poems of The Rock, his appreciation of Schwartz as a poet had markedly improved.
that his school friends, eager to emulate Schwartz’s reading, had gone first to Spinoza. At an age
when Schwartz’s intellectual sensibilities are beginning to take shape, he is already a
disseminator of Spinoza’s ideas. This is more obvious in another, rather light-hearted, letter to
Sawyer dated October 16th. Schwartz sets forth a regimen of daily intellectual activities and
readings for Sawyer to undertake. Six items into the regimen, Schwartz exhorts his friend “[t]o
read Spinoza for a half hour every day, [and to] look at Cézanne, Daumier, Rembrandt (choosing
one)” (8). It is important to note that while Spinoza is not the only philosopher included in this
list (the other is Aristotle), he is unique in being the only one listed alongside artists. That
Spinoza appears alongside a trio of visual artists suggests that Schwartz felt a particular affinity
between this philosopher and the arts. While this single letter is scant evidence of that
association, it appears implicitly in another October letter to Sawyer, which Schwartz opens with
a definition of the affect of love: “Love is to feel about a thing, as if that thing were yourself; so
that the seasons of its existence have the same meaning of hope, fear, desire, preservation, as the
seasons of your own existence; so that your me is so united to that thing as to make it a part of
yourself” (13). For any who have read Spinoza’s Ethics, the language used in this definition and
the postulates that follow it—the invocation of hope and fear alongside desire and preservation—
is unmistakable: Schwartz is paraphrasing part III of the Ethics. Consider Spinoza: “Love is
pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (Ethics III.Def6). In other words, we
love something when we conceive it as the cause of an increase in our powers of acting. Insofar
as we are ourselves only a range of powers to act, and insofar as this external cause is taken to be
the cause of a certain range or portion of those powers, a thing we love is, for Spinoza as for
Schwartz, quite literally a part of us.
A few lines later in Schwartz’s letter, though, we begin to see Schwartz incorporating these Spinozan lines of thinking quite directly into his understanding of the function of the artist. He writes:

The artist gives his possessions new existences with words, colors, tones, shapes. But first he must see. In our time every writer, save one, is deficient in that he does not see to completely possess, or does not translate, give a new, greater existence to his possessions, so that nothing more need be done for them, so that their existence is fixed and eternal.

*(Letters of Delmore Schwartz 13)*

How might a Spinozan understand the phrase “give greater existence to his possessions”? We read from the pen of Spinoza himself that “an absolutely infinite Entity or God will have from himself absolutely infinite power to exist” (I.P11.Schol). This position informs a later pair of propositions that provide the underpinning of Schwartz’s complaint about the modern artist:

“The greater the number of other images with which an image is associated, the more often it springs to life” (V.P13), and, furthermore, “[t]he mind can bring it about that all the affections of the body—i.e., images of things—be related to the idea of God” (V.P14). This relation of all images to God is what Spinoza terms *amor Dei intellectualis*, the intellectual love of God. If individual love involves our seeing an external cause as intimate to our own powers of acting, the intellectual love of God is the love of the absolute—the understanding of all our powers as ultimately deriving from the immanent, singular substance of God. To see the world in such a

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62 It is unclear who Schwartz sees as the one exception to the deficiency of modern writers. Though he references T. S. Eliot, H. G. Wells, and e. e. cummings later in the same letter, neither seem likely candidates given the context.

63 Spinoza’s language derives from a long theological tradition, though we should be cautious of reading his definition of the intellectual love of God as being intrinsically theological. “God” here has no will, no personality, no rewards or punishments to give, and offers nothing to be worshipped, being itself nothing more than existence and its dynamic processes.
way is to conceive it *sub specie aeternitatis*, or under a kind of eternity. With this picture in place, we can begin to see the basis of Schwartz’s complaint: writing should tend toward the eternal, should express the immanent relations between the entities that it is examining and the world in which all artistic endeavour—indeed, all endeavour—takes place. The writing of his age, he feels, does not do so, but instead merely piles on differentiations (“words, colors, tones, shapes”) without relating them to the indwelling vitality of which they are expressions. In other words, contemporary artists express the multiplicity of life well enough, but lack an understanding of how to link this multiplicity to Life itself. We have already in Schwartz an incipient sense that aesthetics must be linked in some way to an ontology. That ontology, as it so happens, looks a lot like Spinoza’s, even before Schwartz embarked on the (ultimately abortive) academic track toward becoming a professional philosopher, which involved him studying with the likes of Alfred North Whitehead (one of the key formulators of modern process philosophy) and Harry Austyn Wolfson (the renowned scholar of medieval philosophy whose writings on Spinoza are still among the most important and wide-ranging in English). While it is possible that Schwartz’s encounters with these scholars confirmed his own interest in Spinoza, we see from his 1931 letters that he was already using Spinoza to frame his thinking about art.64

If we skip ahead some twenty years, we see that the ideas that Schwartz begins developing in 1931 are remarkably consistent across the span of his career. In 1951, Schwartz’s essay “The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World” appeared in *Poetry* magazine. The opening paragraph declares that “[t]o have a vocation is to have a calling, to be called […] to have a vocation is very much like being in love. Being in love and being called to write poetry

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64 It is also likely that Schwartz’s interest in Spinoza was fueled by a sense that they shared a heritage, both being children of Jewish immigrants.
are often linked” (14). Just as there was a connection between love and the essential activity of poetry in the 1931 letter to Sawyer, so too is there a direct link here. Further, Schwartz writes that “the poet at any time may be said to be engaged in bringing things together, in making new things, in uniting the old and the new, all by the inexhaustible means which words provide for him” (15). Poetry is akin to love, then, insofar as it involves bringing together a diverse array of phenomena under the idea of a single cause—the poem itself, at the local level, or Life, at the global. Schwartz later observes that after the two world wars, modern Americans have a sense of how “the fate of the individual is inseparable from what is happening in the whole world” (20). It has become less plausible than ever before to assert the autonomy—perhaps even the personality, the closure—of the individual in a world that suggests individuals are reciprocally determined by one another and by vast networks of causality. If this is slightly different in context and tone than the letter of 1931, its fundamental content is not, and Schwartz continues to develop what he initially devised in his readings of Spinoza. Perhaps most interestingly of all, though, is that he goes on to wed this Spinozan conception of the artist’s role with a brief discussion of the degradation and transformation of formal language. While Schwartz’s sense that the poet “must resist the innumerable ways in which words are spoiled” in modernity may strike us as rather conservative, he goes on to suggest that this situation may “help to bring about the remarkable and often multilingual sensitivity of the modern poet to the language which is the matrix from which he draws his poems” (16-17). Though it is the role of the poet to perform a sort of differential synthesis of old and new elements of experience, and though this role involves, on the one hand, an overt resistance to the forces of linguistic decay, the poet must recognize on the other hand that this decay is itself a source of novelty, a process of altering what kinds of relations are possible to achieve in language. This phenomenon is similar to what I earlier
described as decadence: language that is aware of its own dissolution, writing that understands and elaborates the way in which it is itself decomposing.

Schwartz goes on to say that “the degradation” and disease to which poetry is subjected in the modern world are also one of the fruitful and necessary conditions of genuine poetry and of a genuine vocation for the art of poetry” (17). There is again a symmetry between the vocation of poetry and love: we understand that our powers of acting are not self-made or intrinsic to us, but rather constitute the very intimacy of other beings to what we are and what we are capable of doing, of feeling, and of understanding. To attain knowledge, then, is to affect ourselves with this love, to understand the myriad ways in which we are caused and, ultimately, to be able to sustain a vision of the world in which everything, even death, has its place. Since this knowing can never comprehend everything, given a metaphysics in which “everything” is given only under conditions of perpetual emergence, that is, in which there is always emerging some quantity of the new, the movement toward greater knowledge—we can now call it joy, or love, as these terms come to express the same expansion—is as much a poetic process or a making, in the classical sense of poiesis, as an epistemological one. The poet’s vocation is not only to proceed in a relation of love to the given world, but to devise ways of knowing that world. And so, if death is one of the means by which that world changes, that is, if we cannot take the givenness of our existence for granted but must instead understand it as being riven by death at every moment, as perpetually deviating from itself, then this too must become a spur to knowledge. We must strive to know what death is, not because there is anything in and of itself to know about death, and certainly not because there may be some other plane or a substantially different world beyond the veil of death, but because decomposition ensures that there is always something other to compose. The poet cannot write in a world that does not die. The task of a vocation for poetry,
then, is to love death itself, to extract from it new powers of acting. Poetry demands that it must be possible to die without viewing death as intrinsically, unalterably worthy of despair, knowing that we have been dying all along. Such, at any rate, is Schwartz’s inversion of Spinozism.

But what does that inversion actually look like? Perhaps the closest that Schwartz comes to articulating his vision of a poetry that must not only know death, but strives to love it, is in “Summer Knowledge,” a poem that Schwartz felt was significant enough a statement of his poetic project that he titled his 1958 volume of selected poems after it. Schwartz’s speaker first attempts to deduce the nature of the poem’s eponymous knowledge apophatically, by elaborating what it is not; the poem opens with the declaration that summer knowledge “is not the winter’s truth, the truth of fall, the autumn’s fruition, vision, and recognition: It is not May knowledge […] It is not the knowing and the knowledge of the gold fall and / the ripened darkened vineyard, / Nor the black tormented, drenched and rainy knowledge of birth, / April, and travail” (157). The “truth of fall” suggests, on the one hand, that summer knowledge is neither the knowledge of winter nor that of fall; in other words, it is neither the knowledge of the process of dying (autumn) nor of death itself (winter). However, the “truth of fall” also suggests the Adamic Fall of the book of Genesis, and the truth of fall and the fruition of autumn must both be understood as *periphrases* of winter. Just as the Biblical Fall acquaints humankind with suffering and death, autumn acquaints us with the gradual and symbolic decay of the world around us; its “fruition” is ironic, since what comes into flower at the end of autumn is the very end of flowering. Though winter is the culmination of this autumn, Schwartz distinguishes between them: where winter is death in itself, or rather death as the outcome of a process, autumn is the process of which winter is the outcome. By the end of the first line, the speaker has stricken two of the four seasons from this meditation of life. Perhaps more interestingly, Schwartz also
distinguishes between the kind of life-knowledge that he seeks from the symbolism of the spring months of April and May. While springtime is a more conventional figure of vitality than summer, Schwartz’s reasons for rejecting it are significant. He associates the springtime with “the knowledge of the womb’s convulsions, and the coiled cord’s / raveled artery, severed and cut open” (157). He elaborates on spring knowledge, calling it “[t]he agony of the first knowledge of pain,” which is “worse than death, / or worse than the thought of death” (157). It is the association of springtime with birth, in other words, that leads Schwartz to separate it from the vital knowledge that he is after; while springtime may indeed pose its own knowledge, it is one that cannot be dissociated from violence and suffering (at least for Schwartz’s speaker). With allusion to the Biblical account of the Fall, Schwartz figures birth and the severing of the umbilical cord as painful mementos of the expulsion from Eden and the knowledge of suffering. This knowledge is “worse than death” or “the thought of death” because the most intractable aspect of the fear of death is not the idea that one day we will die—perhaps it is impossible altogether not to imagine the end of life—but rather that we may end our lives in the throes of some agony. The spring knowledge of life as inseparable from pain cannot give us traction before the affective problem of death since it gives the experiences of discrete life processes alongside the sad or limiting affects. Recall again the maxim that Deleuze extracts from Spinoza: “Sadness makes no one intelligent” (“Spinoza: 24/01/1978”). To the same end, the knowledge of pain for Schwartz can give only “the beginning, so distant from all knowledge / and all conclusion, all indecision and all illusion” (157). It gives only the beginning insofar as it figures birth (and the life that follows) as suffering. Spring knowledge gives us an echo of what I have

65 It would be profitable to compare Schwartz’s stance here to William Carlos Williams’s in Spring and All and Paterson. Williams is perhaps the paradigmatic example of an American poet who explores the implications of generative violence in the conventional association between life and springtime.
been referring to as the pessimistic high modernist position: in spite of the association of spring with new birth, the life that Schwartz sees in spring knowledge is essentially the death-like life of pessimistic modernism. Indeed, we might read Schwartz’s description of the “black tormented, drenched and rainy knowledge of birth, April, and travail” as an echo of Eliot’s famous opening lines of The Waste Land: “April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (Schwartz 157; Eliot 1-4). For the same reason that pessimism offers no escape from optimism, spring knowledge offers little in the way of an alternative to autumn knowledge: there is no difference in kind between the pairs of supposedly opposite concepts. Schwartz’s poem frames spring and autumn knowledge as little more than variations of one another, so that what in spring appears as a death-like life is in autumn only a life-like death.

Midway through “Summer Knowledge,” Schwartz abandons—if only momentarily—the method of negative deduction and gives the first positive assertion of one of the qualities of the titular knowledge: “Summer knowledge is green knowledge, country knowledge, / the knowledge of growing and the supple recognition / of the fullness and the fatness and the roundness of ripeness” (157). Though it might be tempting to read the elusive summer knowledge as a wisdom of nature, the knowledges of spring, autumn, and winter, too, were framed in terms of natural settings and processes. While summer knowledge may indeed be “country knowledge,” that assertion perhaps sounds more informative than it is. What prevents the “drenched and rainy knowledge of birth,” of spring, from being a country knowledge? The point, perhaps, is that nothing does—that the knowledges of summer, spring, winter, and autumn express the same nature under various guises, seen as operating in various ways. And yet, Schwartz insists on ascribing a singular importance to summer knowledge. Where spring
represents our knowledge of birth, autumn of decay, and winter of death itself, summer is the knowledge of increase, excess, and “growing.” Schwartz’s list of qualities—“fullness,” “fatness,” “roundness,” “ripeness”—suggest a world in excess of itself, a world immediately at hand. In a kind of poetic dramatization of the dynamics at work in Spinoza’s definition of substance, or of my own appropriation of it as Life itself, Schwartz pairs his flurry of descriptors with the unchanging substantive suffix “-ness.” The teeming multiplicity of the actual compositions of Life occur always with the single substantive suffix, which qualifies them as expressions of a kind of being. The Life expressed by summer knowledge is defined by the non-contradiction of unity and diversity, just as Schwartz’s line grounds its array of qualities in the one substantive suffix. Summer knowledge can entertain these two (only apparently contradictory) qualities of substance—unity and diversity, singularity and multiplicity. A few lines later, Schwartz returns to the method of negative deduction to allow us to grasp another quality of summer knowledge: “[It] is not picture knowledge, nor is it the / knowledge of lore and learning.” (157). Summer knowledge, in other words, is not an object of representation. It cannot be rendered into a picture that another would find immediately intelligible and it cannot be learned like a fact from a book. It is not a knowledge that can be reproduced, but one which must be made or produced in the world. In this sense, summer knowledge is a poiesis. But it is not enough that this knowledge be made—Schwartz insists that it must be made into a kind of second nature, that it must be made quite natural and intimate to our lives. The speaker declares that summer knowledge is “cat knowledge, deer knowledge, the knowledge of the / full-grown foliage, of the snowy blossom and the rounding fruit” (158). Schwartz here returns to natural imagery and it is at this point the poem veers uncomfortably toward romanticizing the unknowable alterity of the non-human animal or of the plant. If we bracket for a moment
Schwartz’s questionable treatment of these non-human others, it is possible to extract the key idea that he is gesturing towards: a way of imagining a knowledge that would not involve mediation. The knowing of the rounding fruit, Schwartz might say, does not distance the fruit from its activity of self-perpetuation. In other words, summer knowledge, as far as Schwartz is concerned, must be immediate—there can be no unbridgeable gap between the knower and the known, or, in Spinoza’s terms, between the knowledge of the mode and that of the substance.

As I note above, knowledge, poiesis, and love are a trifecta in Schwartz’s thinking. Having identified the first two terms, we are now in a position to identify the third and to say how Schwartz sees this Spinozan variety of love as addressing the affective problem of death. Schwartz regains his footing as he enters the final movement of the poem: “It is the knowledge of the ripening apple when it moves to the / fullness of the time of falling to rottenness and death” (158). Here at last, then, we see summer knowledge as a life that persists in the presence of death—but not against it. The ripening apple expresses its striving as far as it can, to the greatest intensity that it is able, though the moment of its greatest ripeness is also the moment at which it begins the process of rott ing. In contrast to the narrative of the Fall, Schwartz depicts the apple as having its own characteristic striving; it is not merely an object of curiosity or desire for a human agent, but it is constituted by its own desire to persist in the affirmation of its power to be. Whatever is achieved in this striving also becomes subject to decadence or decay. The

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66 From this perspective, Schwartz’s description of the apple echoes a particularly Spinozan thought that Emerson records in an 1841 journal entry: “Metamorphosis is nature. The foetus does not more strive to be man than yonder bur of light we call a nebula tends to be a ring, a comet, a solid globe, a sun, & the parent of new stars” (Selected Journals 1820-1842 774). As I note above, Spinoza’s concept of the conatus is often translated as “striving.” Here, using this Spinozan vocabulary, Emerson goes even further than Schwartz by affirming the symmetry of organic and inorganic life, that the conatus of the foetus is no less vital than that of the nebula. In identifying nature with change, rather than with accumulation, expansion, or progress (which imply a specific kind of change), Emerson leaves room for us to imagine that death, too, being no more than a decompositional mode of change, is a part of these vital strivings.
life expressed in the ripening apple is like that of life seen through the translucency of death: what appears at one moment as a potency appears at another as a passage toward death. The more we see the coincidence of composition and decomposition, the looser the grip of the affective problem on our thinking becomes. To that end, the speaker declares that “summer knowledge is the knowledge of death as birth, / Of death as the soil of all abounding flowering flaring rebirth” (158). Schwartz deploys a poetic strategy of pairing diverse prefixes with a single suffix, though now the suffix is no longer the substantive “-ness,” but “-ing,” a marker of progressive continuity. The unity of Life is no longer the stable being-in-itself implied by the “-ness” suffixes, but the continuous verbal activity or actualization of the progressive present. Schwartz emphasizes this aspect of the line by omitting any punctuation between the suffixed terms: there is a sudden velocity of language as the speaker skips along the qualities—the “abounding flowering flaring”—that she or he is ascribing to the rebirths that emerge from the soil of death. Summer knowledge is the recognition of life’s intimacy to death, of the necessity of death to the continued circulation of life; it is in this sense that it is “the truth of love”; that is, summer knowledge is what arises when we disabuse ourselves of the notion that death is an evil—it is, on the contrary, the very condition upon which we are able to live (158). Thus, Schwartz proclaims at the end of his poem that “summer knowledge is not knowledge at all: it is second nature, first nature fulfilled, a new birth and a new death for rebirth” (158). This second nature is no supplemental world, no new plane of existence, but only the very nature that will have been fulfilled when we surmount the affective problem, when we submerge life and death into one another and are able to affirm—even to enjoy—the result. It is a qualitative, affective change that occurs only where we are already standing. Lastly, if summer knowledge turns out
after all to have been no knowledge, it is not that it was never there to find, but rather that it is
the form knowledge takes when it ceases to be distinct from our activities as living beings.

In the poem’s last image, Schwartz imagines summer knowledge as a luminescence
“soaring and rising out / of the flames of turning October, burning November […] growing more
and / more vivid and tall / In the consummation and the annihilation of the blaze of fall” (158).
With these lines, Schwartz closes by return: the “truth of fall” that opens the poem returns here to
be transfigured. The fire of summer knowledge both consummates and annihilates the fire of fall
and the Fall alike. Summer knowledge annihilates the Edenic Fall insofar as life and death no
longer pertain to any external worlds and the pain of living is no longer a mark of the innate
corruption of human life. A bifurcation emerges here between the Christian sense of corruption
as sin or fallenness and an immanentist sense of death as life’s counterpoint. The Fall is
consummated not in the Christian sense, but in an immanentist one, as summer knowledge
assents to seeing all life as pervaded by a death that cannot be ascribed to moral corruption or
fallenness, but which is perfectly coincident and parallel with life—summer life is indeed owed
unto death, though no longer as payment for sin. The reading is not dissimilar, though, if we read
“fall” as synonymous with autumn. The knowledge of autumn, as Schwartz has it, is of decaying
things, of life as being in the midst of dying; this sensibility is annihilated inasmuch as summer
knowledge affirms that death is immanent to life (just as life is necessarily immanent to death).
And yet, autumn knowledge is also consummated, since summer knowledge cannot exist without
it, or without the possibility of conceiving the world as dying. For that matter, summer
knowledge also proves itself inseparable from the knowledge of spring, as we see in Schwartz’s
use of the language of birth and rebirth in this final passage. Birth is no longer the entryway into
a life that will be spent under the threat of agony and death, but the promise of a life that no longer takes death for its antagonist.

In the remaining pages, I will shift my attention to showing how Stevens’s poem “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” dramatizes an unavowedly Spinozian approach toward the affective problem of death that is genetically similar to Schwartz’s, though independently constructed. The connections between Stevens’s poetry and Spinoza are somewhat more mediated than is the case with Schwartz, though. Despite his reputation as a philosophical poet, Stevens had no such pretensions to that title and appears to have had few direct encounters with Spinoza’s thinking. Certainly, there is an argument to be made that Stevens could have encountered these ideas vicariously, through his sympathies with Emerson. Richard Poirier makes a forceful case in *The Renewal of Literature* that Stevens should be understood as part of a lineage of American pragmatism that Emerson’s ideas inform and orient (9, 13). As I suggest in my introduction, there is considerable overlap between what marks Emerson as an early pragmatist and what marks him as part of the Spinozan strain. To that end, if Stevens’s pragmatism (represented by his concern with figures of transition, instability, and emergence) necessitates our pairing him with Emerson, we might well say on that account that he must be paired with Spinoza. But here, again, we would arrive at a somewhat unsatisfying genetic explanation the likes of which I tried to avoid in my discussion of Barnes. While this type of explanation is to some degree unavoidable, there is a rather more direct encounter between Stevens and Spinoza that merits discussion first. In a 1942 letter to Harvey Breit describing a recent visit to the Old Dutch Church in Kingston, New York, Stevens recalls a pamphlet, given to him by the church’s janitor, that

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67 There is also an obvious link between Spinoza’s immanent understanding of God, Emerson’s pantheism, and Stevens’s equation of God and the imagination (see especially the poems “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”).
contained an article by one Judge Hasbrouck about the church, which contains a brief allusion to Spinoza: “Indeed when Spinoza’s great logic went searching for God it found him in a predicate of substance” (qtd. in *Letters of Wallace Stevens* 415). The letter is noteworthy not because it gives Stevens an especially deep insight into the workings of Spinoza’s thought—it does not—but for the conclusions that Stevens draws from the allusion:

> Now, if a lawyer as eminent as Judge Hasbrouck went to church because it made it possible for him to touch, to see, etc., the very predicate of substance, do you think he was anything except a poet? He was only one of nine of them, so that, instead of nine judges, there were nine poets in the congregation, all of them struggling to get at the predicate of substance, although not all of them struggled to do so through Spinoza’s great logic. (415)

What qualifies the judges as poets for Stevens is that they strive to touch “the very predicate of substance,” to recognize their own contact with the immanence that Spinoza terms God. To touch substance is essentially to express it, to conceive of our own actions as those of a finite parcel of substance acting upon itself; this expression constitutes a knowledge, a joyful expansion of being, indeed, a love. Further still, if this effort to grasp the immanence of God makes poets of the judges, we can imagine that Stevens recognizes his own poetic activity as striving for the same kind of contact.

> There is further evidence of this connection between poetry and the Life of immanence in Stevens’s 1951 Moody Lecture at the University of Chicago (later published as “A Collect of Philosophy”), where he argues that many philosophical concepts and ideas are themselves poetic. Though we are now moving away from a direct link with Spinoza by several degrees, there is
nevertheless a distinct resonance of the philosopher in what Stevens, in his lecture, sees as a paradigm case of the “poetic idea”: “The idea of the infinity of the world is a poetic idea because it gives the imagination *sudden life*” (851, my emphasis). Stevens’s criterion for calling an idea “poetic” should remind us of Spinoza’s definition of joy as an increase in one’s power of existence or action. In the terms that I have been using, joy, like the poetic for Stevens, allows a discrete life to express more fully the immanent Life that underlies it. But how much of this thinking is it plausible to ascribe to Spinoza’s influence? Unlike Schwartz, Stevens had no deep investment in philosophy for its own sake, though he saw its value. Furthermore, we should be wary, as Bart Eeckhout cautions, of searching for too coherent a system in Stevens’s poetry (“Stevens and Philosophy” 109). This is a warning that we can surely extend to his letters and prose as well. However, while Stevens is not a systematic thinker, his engagement with Spinoza’s ideas (or at least with ideas formed under a Spinozan sign, so to speak) ought to be taken seriously, particularly as it complicates the portrayal of Stevens’s poetry as concerned first and foremost with phenomenological and epistemological problems by revealing a distinct interest in the ontological, in the constitution of being—a narrative that Eeckhout endorses, and which has, until recently, been quite widespread in Stevens scholarship. Stevens’s comments in “A Collect” and his letter on the Old Dutch Church visit suggest that he, like Schwartz, was willing to afford a more fundamental role to his vocation. In this sense, poetry cannot help but

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68 Stevens himself is quite clear about the fundamental relationship between poetry and joy. He once remarked, in a comment that critics have repeated ever since, that of his own poems, his favourite is “The Emperor of Ice Cream” because it “wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems […] to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry” (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 768). “Gaudiness” suggests more than the surface-level of language, though, and more than the pure showiness of style or gesture; it suggests, most of all, the Latin root of “gaudy”: *gaudium*, or joy.
explore our relationship to Life and its interest in questions of knowing cannot help but shed the trappings of epistemology to adopt those of ontology.\(^69\)

A last and decisive source of the Spinozan strain in Stevens, which will bear in significant ways on my reading of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” is George Santayana, for whom the poem is an elegy, and who lectured on philosophy and aesthetics at Harvard while Stevens was a student. Santayana was himself decisively influenced by Spinoza, who Martin A. Coleman concludes “was perhaps the only philosopher who could rival the Greeks for influence on Santayana’s work,” and while Santayana was not a Spinoza scholar as such, his work proceeds from the first principle of Spinozan naturalism: there is only one plane or level of existence; there is no “outside” of the world in which we live (xxxvii). It is this naturalism that Santayana singles out for glowing praise in his 1910 introduction to Andrew Boyle’s translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Santayana’s philosophy bears a distinct Spinozist impression. Though Santayana never taught Stevens, the pair became close friends and frequently discussed poetry together (Litz 275); in a 1952 letter to Barbara Church, Stevens, having heard of Santayana’s death a few days earlier, writes that “he knew [Santayana] well, in Cambridge, where he often asked me to come to see him” (761). According to A. Walton Litz, though Stevens had known Santayana almost his entire adult life, his interest in the philosopher intensified only in the late 1940s, though Litz contends that this interest was “not based on his specific writings or ideas but

\(^{69}\) I do not mean to suggest that the choice between epistemology and ontology, in philosophy or in poetry, is ever an either-or proposition. Of course, it is not. The distinction that I draw is one of priority, of which philosophical “register” emerges as the one that the poem or poet in question most deeply explores. Among Stevens critics, Steven Shaviro (“‘That Which is Always Beginning’: Stevens’s Poetry of Affirmation”), David R. Jarraway (*Wallace Stevens among Others: Diva-Dames, Deleuze, and American Culture*), and Raina Kostova (“Deleuzian Underpinnings: The Affective Emergence of Stevens’ Concept of the Supreme Fiction”) all emphasize the value of exploring the ontological implications and suggestions of Stevens’s work. Not coincidentally, these critics also make extensive use of Deleuze’s concepts and interventions in philosophy to frame their arguments; however, there are also analogous attempts to privilege the ontological from other directions. See, for instance, the second chapter of Daniel Tompsett’s *Wallace Stevens and Pre-Socratic Philosophy*, “The Ontological Experience of the Work of Art.”
on his exemplary role as a philosopher-poet” (277). Indeed, it is as such a figure who could bridge philosophy and poetry that Stevens portrays the late Santayana in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” which he likely wrote with a mind to his own poor health, wary that he was nearing the end of his own life. And yet, I am not so sure that Stevens’s interest in Santayana was as limited as Litz suggests; indeed, later criticism suggests otherwise. George S. Lensing contends that Stevens may have known Santayana’s 1899 volume *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* quite well (27), while Sidney Feshbach contends that Stevens’s “Sunday Morning” “is informed, stanza after stanza, by chapter after chapter of Santayana’s *Interpretations*, which serves as a major pretext for his poem” (78). At the very least, the early Stevens appears to have thoroughly absorbed—and been thoroughly absorbed by—Santayana’s writings, especially on aesthetics and religion.

If it is indeed legitimate to talk about Santayana as a potential conduit of Spinoza’s immanentism on Stevens, it may well pay off to examine one of the last texts in which Santayana engages directly with Spinoza, where he formulates a own variant of Spinoza’s *amor Dei intellectualis* that recalls Schwartz’s development of an outline for a theory of poetry from his reading of Spinoza. The text in question is of a conference address that Santayana delivered in 1932 at The Hague on the occasion of the tercentenary of Spinoza’s birth, titled “Ultimate Religion.” While I have no evidence that Stevens ever encountered this text, in it Santayana does not expand appreciably beyond concepts that he has already theorized in earlier works that Stevens is more likely to have read; Santayana instead focuses on drawing the links between his own philosophical treatment of religion and its inspiration in Spinoza’s work. A brief examination of the key points of Santayana’s address will allow us to see how Stevens devises a similar—and, whether he realizes it or not, a similarly Spinozan—strategy for addressing the
affective problem of death in his poetry. Santayana frames his remarks around a problem: a self-reflective mind, he suggests, “has perceived that though it is living, it is powerless to live; that though it may die, it is powerless to die; and that altogether […] it is in the hands of some alien and inscrutable power” (340). Though we find ourselves afflicted by death or sustained by life, we can make no accounting of why that is so or of what animates the processes in which we are caught up. Santayana terms this shadowy animation, this totality of active force, “omnificence.” It is neither a god, nor can it be ascribed any specific powers; it is in essence only a pure vitality, what I have been calling Life (in contrast to life as the putative opposite of death), and this vitality unfolds our world according to mechanisms that we can only foggily discern (340-41). Faced with the irresolvable mysteriousness of this hypothetical force, the question becomes one of how we best strive after our own joy, to which Santayana’s reply is that we must affirm the world that this omnificence sustains, refusing to see it either as the best possible world (the optimistic conclusion of Leibniz) or the worst (the pessimistic conclusion of Schopenhauer); it is, per Santayana and Spinoza both, the only possible world (341). “My own eclipse, my own vices, my own sorrows,” writes Santayana, “may become a subject to me for exact calculation and a pleasing wonder. The philosophical eye may compose a cosmic harmony out of these necessary conflicts, and an infinite life out of these desirable deaths” (341).

Santayana next offers his own version of Spinoza’s intellectual love of God, which he defines in terms of harmony between necessity (what the world gives us) and our own strivings. On the side of physical entities, this harmony takes the form of health; on the intellectual side, it takes the form of knowledge. The highest degree of love, Santayana supposes, is the love of health and knowledge—our own health, our own knowledge, insofar as we recognize them as dependent on all else that exists around us (342). While one good can exclude another insofar as
both are bodily entities (actual, extended beings), the mind has only a potential existence—it
does not exclude one good from another but can entertain their contradiction and can find a
modicum of joy in its affirmation or love of such necessary sorrows as death.\textsuperscript{70} There can be no
bodily health in death, but there can be a type of knowledge about death, even if it can only ever
be a knowledge “on the make” or in pursuit. Knowledge about something as intimate and as
alien as death, after all, cannot help but be fugitive. This is the logic of Santayana’s Spinozan
understanding of love: “To love things spiritually, that is to say, intelligently and disinterestedly,
means to love the love in them, to worship the good which they pursue, and to see them all
prophetically in their possible beauty” (344). Though this language of love might read today as
being rather saccharine, I see Santayana’s effort as an effective means of thinking about a role
for poetry in approaching the affective problem of death. What we may love in other things, even
if they afflict us with sorrow, is that they are capable of producing joyful encounters—perhaps
not for us now, or ever, but for something. The problem does not disappear, nor could it, but it
ceases to be insurmountable. Its “solution,” if such a word is appropriate, is now available to us,
but only through a discipline, perhaps a praxis, a long process of “getting to know” death in such
a way that neither denies it nor revels in it, that knows there is no traction to be had with
pessimism or in optimism but acknowledges death in all its necessity. One of the roles of any
effective death writing, to my mind, is guiding us toward this praxis. It is in this sense that
encountering these works and becoming “decadent” readers is an apprenticeship. Through such
death writing as we find in Schwartz and Stevens, we learn to love a certain death like health—a

\textsuperscript{70} Though Santayana describes a kind of asymmetry between body and mind (in the sense that relations that would
be impossible between contradictory bodies can be conceived in the mind as non-contradictory), it is worth noting
that this formulation does not push Spinoza into idealism, since he ascribes no lesser ontological value to extended
bodies. Furthermore, the mind has no special purview—what is expressed through mind is only what is also
potentially expressible through bodies.
health that does not aim to preserve life at all costs or to extinguish death, as did the progressivist discourses on health earlier in the twentieth century, but which takes death as an immanent condition of life.

In the interest of showing how Stevens expresses this healthful love of death in his poetry, I will take “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” as an expression of a Stevensian version of this affirmatively decadent attitude. The poem is a meditation on the death (and death-bed) of Santayana and gives Stevens a fitting opportunity to pay tribute to his former mentor’s speculations on religion, which influenced the young Stevens so markedly. But to understand the depth of the poem’s engagement with death, we must also understand that it is not only Santayana’s passing that Stevens has in mind. Stevens collected “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” in his final volume, 1954’s The Rock, which went to print only months before the poet’s death of stomach cancer, during which time Stevens knew he was quite ill; with this fact in mind, Helen Vendler has recently suggested that The Rock finds Stevens “representing and enacting the interface of life and death” (“Looking at the Worst: Wallace Stevens’s The Rock” 25). Similarly, Eleanor Cook has written of the tribute to Santayana that “[t]hreshold imagery, where ‘two worlds’ meet, runs through the poem, as does a contrast of what is small and shrinking with what is large and long-lasting” (284). It is necessary to clarify how this interfacing, this attention to transitions and thresholds, works in order to show how it supports Stevens’s “meditation of life”—the decadent conversion of death from an affective problem to the impetus toward something akin to Spinoza’s and Santayana’s intellectual love. Stevens writes that “[o]n the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street / Become the figures of heaven” and that “[t]he threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome / Beyond [become] alike in the make of the mind” (432). Just as Santayana suggests that in Spinoza the mind can conceive of the necessary
co-existence of entities that cannot coexist as bodies, Stevens integrates the material world into the ideal—or, better, into something akin to the Deleuzian “virtual,” that which is wholly real, but not actual; the virtual does not take precedence before the actual, but, rather, each is a necessary condition for the existence of the other (Piercey 271). This reference to the “make of the mind” in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” must be read as something more nuanced than an elevation of ideas over bodies. If it were only this idealism, Stevens’s poem would amount merely to a dramatization—however beautiful—of the theological comfort of a retreat from mortality into the death-deflecting holdfast of the mind, though he had long been ambivalent about these sorts of resolutions. And yet, for all his reputation as a poet of the mind, Stevens himself appears to reject a straightforwardly idealist understanding of poetry. In the aphorisms of his “Adagia,” Stevens writes that the “ideal is the actual become anaemic” (904). The ideal is only a pallid abstraction as long as one conceives of it as separate from its instantiation in the world, where it could be both a cause of effects and an effect of causes, where it could act and be acted upon—where it could be actual. Conceived as properly immanent to the actual, though, the ideal becomes something else—not the transcendent realm of Platonic ideas, but something like a reservoir of powers of being that could be determined into actuality under a different set of material conditions, but which so far are only potential. According to a Santayana-inflected reading of Spinoza’s terms, we might say that minds comprehend the world in its indeterminacy, as change or becoming, whereas bodies experience is instantiated and determinate, though neither can be separated without impoverishing the other. To the extent that the virtual or the ideal is the field of change, it is also that of death, which has no determinate meaning in and of itself, but is only, in a manner of speaking, the undetermining of bodies.
In his tribute to Santayana, Stevens attempts to depict the twinned movement of composition and decomposition, life and death, as part of an immanent, complex process of ontological constitution—Life. In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” the actual city of Rome, where the philosopher lies dying, bleeds into the “more merciful Rome” of the beyond; likewise, the figures in the street suddenly become those of heaven. Despite Stevens’s theological language, it is not clear that the scene is straightforwardly religious. The fact that the earthly and the heavenly blend together in the mind suggests that the heaven past the threshold is not theological, not really “beyond,” in the sense of being transcendent. The material world does not so much rise up into the heavenly as the heavenly descends into the material and populates itself with actual figures. The figures of the material world become infused with “majestic movement”; in other words, we glimpse them virtually, as fields of potentialities, rather than determinate bodies. The speaker remarks of “[h]ow easily the blown banners change to wings,” how imagination can infuse what is present and actual with a changed and a charged sense: seen from near-death, the banners blowing in the wind, which are presumably tethered to a flagstaff or some other fastening, become symbols of movement, of virtuality. If the language of death is conspicuously absent here, it is because composition and decomposition, life and death, are absorbed here in the single action of movement; they are rendered linguistically coequal, even indistinct. The heavenly presence in these lines is legible as the immanent trace of pure potentiality, or what I have called Life itself. Since the poem presents a threshold, it gives us neither this Life in its own right nor discrete lives as if they were disconnected from this immanent vitality. When we read in the second stanza that the two Romes are “alike in the make of the mind,” this is because the mind does not distinguish the two levels but perceives their inseparability—the virtual movement that constitutes the ideal world is nothing if it is only
movement itself, for something must be there to move or change; virtuality absolutely requires actuality, materiality. The actual is already dead, or at least “become anemic,” if it is not infused with a power to change; likewise, though, the immanent Life would be nothing more than a promissory note for the afterlife if it were disconnected from the actual lives that it nourishes. Thus, “[i]t is as if in a human dignity / Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which / Men are part both in the inch and in the mile” (432). I read this “human dignity” as that of the philosopher lying in his death-bed, left with little else than the knowledge of the death impending. The two parallels, then, are the two vitalities, Life itself and the movements of life and death through which Life lives, the former vast and continuous (the mile), the latter only segments of that continuity (the inch). They are parallel insofar as nothing lives—nothing has “a perspective”—that does not belong with equal intimacy to both levels, to life-death and to the immanent Life. To measure any inch is to measure a parcel of space that, if seen from another level, could belong to a mile; likewise, to measure any mile is to presuppose the multitude of inches that comprise it. As Stevens puts it in the “Adagia,” “the stream of consciousness is individual; the stream of life, total” (900). Put differently, the limited perspective of instantiated being expresses only a finite parcel of the open totality of Life.

We have seen so far that “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” is intelligible from the perspective of the Spinozan vitalism that I have outlined throughout the chapter; however, there is little that we would be justified to call “intellectual love” in either Spinoza’s or Santayana’s sense until we arrive at the fifth stanza, in which the speaker muses that “[t]he bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns, / The candle as it evades the sight, these are / The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome” (432). Though the poem does not identify for whom these objects are sources of happiness, presumably they are for the old philosopher. Dying in his bed
and thus experiencing the contraction of his own powers of acting, the philosopher must make do with what surrounds him, including, most significantly, the candle’s dancing flame. And yet, these grant him a modicum of joy. As the philosopher is physically impaired and cannot venture into the world on his feet, he imaginatively attends to the immaterial differences with which his dying imagination infuses these surroundings, detecting “a portent / On the chair [and] a moving transparence on the nuns” (433). The philosopher imagines the chair is now suddenly portentous, perhaps of his own death; the nuns, his caretakers, no longer appear as solid objects, but as infused with a shifting aura.\footnote{Santayana had died in the care of the Catholic nuns of the Little Company of Mary (\textit{Letters of Wallace Stevens} 761).} If the chair indeed portends the philosopher’s death, and if it is by an intervention of the imagination that it does so, then the line suggests that the philosopher recognizes his own death as something necessary and impending (portended). By imagining his death as something now fated, or determined by external causes, in the Spinozan parlance, the philosopher secures some measure of his own happiness—death is no longer a mortal incursion of wild chance, but something intimate to the experience that he is presently engaged in understanding. Further, the “moving transparence” of the nuns suggests that the philosopher is able to see behind them—more precisely, that he is able to perceive something behind them worth seeing, even if it cannot truly become an object of sight, since what he sees is nothing after all but the varying transparency. The philosopher detects not only the actual nuns, but perhaps also the transcendental field, the multiplicity of vital processes, that sustains them as actual lives. Between imagining the chair and the nuns, the philosopher’s contemplation of the world through the lens of his own death allows him to reconcile the intrinsic impotency of his situation—that he will eventually be incapable of acting in any fashion—with its necessity, while also allowing him
to detect the materializing movements, the leap of determination from Life to life, that composes
the nuns around him.

The clearest echo of Santayana’s and Spinoza’s sense of intellectual love, and the point at
which it becomes most clearly related to death, occurs when the speaker reflects on the image of
a single candle in the philosopher’s room. Under the gaze of the philosopher reconciling with
the necessity of his own death, the light of the candle does not merely flicker, but “tear[s] against
the wick / To join a hovering excellence, to escape / From fire to be part only of that of which /
Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible” (433). Where Schwartz employs fire in “Summer
Knowledge” as a figure of transformation, Stevens uses it instead as a metaphor for vital striving
or conatus. The description of the fire as “tearing against” the wick suggests that it is constrained
by it and struggles to overcome that restraint; in the fire, though, the philosopher may well
recognize his own situation, a dying man constrained not only to his sick bed, but to a dying
body. The candle stands in for the finitude of life in its individual or discrete sense, burning
down its wick as the dying philosopher spends out his days; the light of the flame, on the other
hand, is an embodiment of the philosopher’s conatus, an outward sign of his own striving to
persist and to exceed himself in being, a burning that radiates upward and outward, in the
opposite direction from the downward burning of the wick; and yet, despite the apparent
opposition of these two activities (death and life, burning down and shining out), they are wholly
inseparable. It is this desirous striving toward ever greater degrees of power that for Spinoza
constitutes the very essence of life—a life is not defined by any particular set of stable qualities.

72 The metaphor of the candle plays prominently in Stevens’s writing. Its appearance in this poem echoes a much
earlier work, “Carlos Among the Candles,” a brief poetic play from 1917. Carlos, “an eccentric pedant” and the
play’s only character, philosophizes that a single lit candle “fills the darkness with solitude, which becomes my own.
I become a part of the solitude of the candle” (Collected Poetry and Prose 615). In “To an Old Philosopher in
Rome,” as in “Carlos Among the Candles,” the metaphor of the single candle suggests a continuity between
perceiver, perceived, and the environment in which perception unfolds.
but by its drive to persist in living (*Ethics* III.DoE1). And yet, the candle’s light strives “to escape / From fire,” that is, from the limit of its striving, the point at which the conative impetus exceeds its power to become actual. The “celestial possible” of which the actual fire is an actualization is a pure potency or, if we consider the candle flame as a metaphor for the philosopher, it is Life itself. To persist in giving off light, the candle must burn. Though the fire strives toward a disembodied perpetuity in the “celestial possible,” this perpetuity is not that of the candle, but only of striving itself—particular things have no hope of dwelling solely in this possibility, though it is the immanent condition of their own individual striving. The actual fire, or the life of the philosopher, can only manifest this pure potency by expressing it in finite forms, and yet, this expression is impossible without there being some figure of excess that is immanent to it, something that is abstract but real. The speaker next implores the dying philosopher to speak and “[b]e orator but with an accurate tongue / And without eloquence,” to express his striving directly, without embellishment.

Here we begin to see one of the starker distinctions between Stevens’s approach to death and, say, Barnes’s. O’Connor seeks to neutralize the negative affects of death in *Nightwood* not by paring back artifice, but by reveling in it; he speaks with the utmost eloquence, but often inaccurately, or at least insincerely. Stevens, on the contrary, exhorts the philosopher to speak plainly of death. Barnes views death as something that must be expressed through artifice, as it cannot be directly addressed; as I suggest above, death is a fugacious object of representation. Barnes’s approach to death, in emphasizing performance, constitutive falsity, surfaces without depths, is more suited to the life “amid surfaces” that Emerson articulates in “Experience,” whereas Stevens approaches nearer the celebratory (though not quite optimistic) tone that Dickinson describes as singing “off charnel steps.” Thus, his speaker looks to the dying
philosopher in order to feel “in this illumined large / The veritable small, so that each of us / Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice / In yours” (433). The “veritable small” is not only the life of finitude in which we all live, but the most finite, most contracted moment of a life nearly extinguished by death. And yet, the speaker implores the philosopher to let us feel in this contraction “the illumined large,” the immanence or omnificence that is Life itself—to show, in other words, that even in the moment of death one need not be divorced of health, or rather of the knowledge that the limits of life have been reached and that the failure to exceed them, the failure to elude death forever, is itself necessary.

To see and hear ourselves in the death-bed oratory of the philosopher would be to discover that what is now necessary for him—the passage toward death—is necessary also for us, though we will not and cannot die the same death. But the philosopher faces his own singular death alone, “[i]mpatient for the grandeur that [he] need[s] / In so much misery; and yet finding it / Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin, / Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead” (433). This “grandeur” is the affect of expansion or joy. The philosopher is impatient to experience it because only this affect can counteract the contraction of powers that death is; however, it can be found only in the misery of knowing that one is going to die. Though one might read the philosopher’s impatient waiting for grandeur as a sign of a consolatory optimism, an anticipation of theological relief or transcendence, we see that he finds this grandeur only in the “afflatus of ruin,” of a death that surrounds and suffuses what remains of his life. There is no passage beyond, but only through, this death-immanence. The philosopher is impatient for what is already available in the meditation of Life that has learned to wait patiently, without hope or fear, for death. The meditation of a life on Life, this discovery and invention of patience, delivers to the philosopher the “total grandeur at the end” and the “[t]otal grandeur of a total edifice,” an
affect of peculiar joy that does not—and cannot—overthrow the misery or the suffering of death, since it is only in this most extreme exposure to mortality that such grandeur is possible (434). There are marked differences of tone and emphasis here from Barnes’s exploration of the difficulties of the hopeless attitude toward death in Nightwood. Though Barnes and the poets Schwartz and Stevens all presume a certain ethos of patience (that is, they presume subjects who prove, in their contemplation or experience of death, to be neither stable, nor self-enclosed, nor centres of free-willing agency), Barnes treats death as much more of an explicit problem, an insoluble difficulty—though I do not view her as pessimistic, she remains the most troubled by the immanence of death and the most cognizant of the difficulty of rendering it joyful. Thus, O’Connor’s performances of his status as a dying subject teeter always between success and failure, between the morbidly vital and the merely morbid. Stevens and Schwartz, on the other hand, though I do not view them as optimists, are less explicitly troubled by the immanence of death. They understand the necessity of grappling with it but are more willing to entertain the possibility of a relatively harmonious reconciliation of life with its deathly side. In this, they are less ambivalent, perhaps less rebellious, heirs of Emerson and Dickinson’s thinking on death. Stevens seems, at any rate, less conflicted about what he discovers in his examination of death: a model of the patience to continue dying, to continue in our speculation about dying, and to find in that patience, in this speculation, an affect of joy that does not erase death’s sadness, but which counters it. In the grandeur immanent to “the veritable small,” we find a veritable counterpoint to death that is nothing other than the “afflatus of ruin”: the vital impetus that accompanies the knowledge and the intellectual love of death.

By way of summary, I would like to make a few general remarks about what it is that literature gives us in the effort to think about death—indeed, in the effort to live and, whilst
living, to die. Philosophy has much to say about death and my interventions here would of course be impossible without it. But philosophy, for all the directions it affords, fulfils a different function than literature. Namely, even highly speculative, limber-minded, and inventive philosophies tend to proceed by a set of principles, either implicitly or explicitly. It is of course no insult to philosophy that it tends in general toward the systematic (notable exceptions such as Nietzsche aside), or that it pursues coherent arguments—or that, abandoning either, it becomes itself a mode of literary invention. In short, literature is often free to be radically experimental in ways that philosophy tends not to be. A writer can be speculative in this manner and still act responsibly as a writer; a philosopher, perhaps with the exception of those who reject systematic thinking in the first place, is bound to a set of principles, to a certain kind of consistency, without which one risks the charge of being a bad philosopher. I have argued with regard to Nightwood that death can be rendered “livable,” or enjoyable, by recognizing and stylizing the fact that the individual lives we cling to are, in a sense, convenient (and, to an extent, necessary) fictions concealing a primary impersonality, an instability, openness, and relationality of self. I suggest that the writer, whose most intimate activity is the invention of valuable and vital lies, is the best equipped to offer an account of these fictions. I am not making the case for an irrationalism toward death, but only for a recognition that the alternative rationalities of literary writing are indispensable in the task of discovering a livable relation to death. The literature that affirms death (what I have called death writing) gives us an avenue of speculation that is conditioned by philosophical discourses, but which operates with a freedom that those discourses cannot. The Spinozan strain of death writing that I have explored in this chapter insists that death may be a miserable affair—surely, we know this well enough—but it is our affair nonetheless. Though it never happens to us, it is happening at every moment; though I will never die, I am forever
dying—these are the paradoxes that death writing entertains. What Stevens and Schwartz ask, what Barnes asks, what Emerson and Dickinson ask, each in their particular ways, is that we take death seriously—more so than either optimism or pessimism allow—but that we do so in the interests of discovering there a joy in which to live until we can no longer. What death writing demands, and what it enacts, is a positively hopeless apprenticeship to death and a tenacious pursuit of patience, such that our hopes and our fears themselves die. It asks above all that we make of our deaths a meditation on Life. Death writing presents itself finally as the voice of the morbid vitalist who learns to love death: May you persist in your dying as well as you can; may you enjoy your death like health.
CHAPTER 2: *SUB SPECIE AETERNITATIS*: MODERNISM'S DYNAMIC ETERNITIES

"That living flood [of the crowd], pouring through these streets, of all qualities and ages, knowest thou whence it is coming, whither it is going? *Aus der Ewigkeit, zu der Ewigkeit hin*: From Eternity, onwards to Eternity! These are Apparitions: what else? Are they not Souls rendered visible; in Bodies, that took shape, and will lose it; melting into air? [...] Friend, thou seest here a living link in that Tissue of History, which inweaves all Being: watch well, or it will be past thee, and seen no more.” – Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*73

"[A]s the poise of my body depends on the equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, so the hours should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours." – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History”74

I. *Deus ex machina*: From Mechanism to Dynamic Eternalism

Time poses a particular, perhaps even a singular, challenge to our inclination to conceptualize the world around us and is vexatious by nature: it is at once tauntingly abstract, a kind of fluid and metamorphic medium through which things glide and change, in which we can observe real effects but no visible, immediately recognizable cause, and insistently concrete, an endless and regular succession of frozen instants by which modern industrial economies measure and divide the work day.

One of the most important and impactful responses to these developments was the time philosophy of Henri Bergson, which he first advanced in 1889’s *Time and Free Will* and developed in the two landmark texts that followed, *Matter and Memory* (1896) and *Creative Evolution* (1907). It is by now a critical truism of modernist studies that the unstable, subjective sense of time that informs the writings of modernists on either side of the Atlantic owes much to the philosophy that Bergson develops in this period. But I do not begin with Bergson so as to

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73 Carlyle 17.
74 *Essays and Lectures* 237.
repeat what has passed into critical orthodoxy. On the contrary, I believe that there is a particular risk of over-emphasizing Bergson’s centrality to writers on the American scene and, by extension, a risk of effacing another line of thinking about the creativity or dynamism of time that predates Bergson’s theory of duration and represented something rather different in the popular imagination. The decisive figure of this line of thought is Spinoza and its key term is not duration, but eternity. However, this concept has remained unfashionable in the wake of the criticisms of thinkers such as Bergson and Martin Heidegger, who dismissed it as a relic of medieval philosophy and a stumbling block to providing an account of time that admits the reality of change and difference. Indeed, this is precisely the critique that Bergson levels against Spinoza: that for all his elaboration of the infinite diversity of finite things, he denies the reality of time and asserts that only the unchanging and the eternal is real. In short, Bergson conlates Spinoza’s eternity with Saint Augustine’s, which is transcendent and unchanging. In the process, Bergson insinuates that his own theory of duration is the only alternative to a long tradition of static eternalism.  

My argument, though, builds on a number of unorthodox readings of Spinoza’s concepts of eternity and the immanent cause by H. F. Hallett (a Spinozan contemporary of Bergson’s), Gilles Deleuze, Bruce Baugh, and Vittorio Morfino. By these lights, we can see that the concept of eternity for Spinoza is not the static and unchanging realm that transcends time, but the productive and generative power that dwells within it as the principle of the immanent potential for one temporality to interact with any number of others. The eternal is not another world, but the structure of the only world. This dynamic eternalism (a phrase likely to strike some as oxymoronic) is one of the constitutive elements of the Spinozan

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75 I use the terms “Augustinian” and “static” more or less interchangeably to describe the traditional, typically theological view of eternity. In calling this view Augustinian, I do not suggest that it necessarily derives from Augustine’s writings, but only that it generally accords with his classic account of eternity from the Confessions, where it represents the timeless, unchanging quality of God’s being.
strain that I argue runs from Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and from there enters into the works of a range of American modernists, where it becomes a surprising means of resisting the implicit progressivism of linear conceptions of time.

This chapter explores the way that the Spinozan strain manifests itself in Emerson and in two exemplary modernist works. The first exemplar of the Spinozan strain is Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town* (1938), which subverts the tropes of rural life as pastoral, repetitious, and unchanging. Against the oft-recycled cliché that sees rural life as being locked or frozen in time, a quasi-eternity in which nothing changes, Wilder imagines the fictional Connecticut town of Grover’s Corners as a dynamic synthesis of a plethora of overlapping registers of time, all of which together actualizes a creative, living eternity. This eternalism contradicts the bourgeois biases implicit in the figuration of the small town as timeless—namely, that the quasi-eternity of the small town is destined to be corrected and swept away by the march of historical progress, of which the city and industrialization are prime figures. At the same time, *Our Town* deploys its eternalism in order to propose a temporal model of community that eschews organism and voluntarism alike, and thus privileges neither the organic whole nor the autonomous individual. It is because this community must be thought across time, as a weaving-in of different temporalities, that it must also resist the progressive conception of linear history which implicitly valorizes any present over any past. But *Our Town* is not so much a defense of the virtues of small town life as a search for an alternative to progressivist conceptions of history that homogenize the multiplicity of different temporalities into a single narrative that everything will

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76 See, for instance, Raymond Williams’s discussion of the treatment of urban settings in the literature of the eighteenth century in *The Country and the City*: “Voltaire saw the pursuit of industry and urbane pleasure as the marks of the city and thence of civilization itself. The golden age and the Garden of Eden, lacking industry and pleasure, were not virtuous but ignorant: the city […] was the symbol of progress and enlightenment” (144, my italics).
tend toward amelioration and consolidation. Wilder conceives this alternative without rooting it either in Bergsonian duration or in traditional static eternalisms. He suggests that the eternal is not merely the totality of all times, but the principle of Life itself which cannot live “all at once,” as it were, but must instead live through the multitude of heterogeneous temporalities that express it. While a Bergsonian approach would reject the concept of eternity in favour of the flux of temporal becomings or durations, Wilder retains eternity but redefines it as the emergent structure and logic of relation that makes time coherent. In this way, Our Town suggests that modernity’s plural sense of time is insufficient, in itself, to do away with the concept of eternity, and that eternity must instead be thought anew.

The second, and rather more complicated, exemplar of the Spinozan strain is William Carlos Williams’s iconoclastic history of the United States, In the American Grain (1925), which I claim takes up an ethical problem related to time: if we live in the present alongside a violent, often brutal past, and if that past never dies, how do we live in such a way that we are not merely repeating that violence and brutality? In brief sketches like “The Fountain of Youth” and “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan,” Williams develops a vision of history as the persistent efficacy of the past in the present. Pasts are preserved with, in, and above all, as the present that they constitute—they are, in a word, immanent to it. In Williams’s treatment of history as an eternal struggle to make time into an advantage in the present, there are echoes of Spinoza’s doctrine of the conatus (the striving of every mode to persist in being, to affirm its power to exist), Emerson’s insistence in “History” that analysis of the past must make it matter here and now, in the present, and Friedrich Nietzsche’s argument in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” that we must devise “unhistorical” uses for history, and make our engagements with the past a means of living now, of living in “health” (63). Nietzsche goes on to voice what we could
well understand as a synthesis of Spinoza’s conatus (albeit reimagined in a more domineering sense, as a will to power, rather than a striving to persist) and Emerson’s polemic against antiquarian uses of history, nothing that “[i]nsofar as it stands in the service of life, history stands in the service of an unhistorical power” (67). Williams’s approach to history strongly resembles this synthesis, particularly in its emphasis on a certain principle of selectivity: history does not preserve the entirety of the past all at once, but only what we are capable of affirming and selecting for repetition in the present. This selectivity, the ethical burden of affirming only what can be sustained and lived with eternally, is the basis upon which Nietzsche first theorizes his concept of the eternal recurrence, which he presents in The Gay Science as a kind of categorical imperative: “If this thought [that every moment of life will be repeated eternally] gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight” (274). There are striking Nietzschean parallels in Williams’s sense that the idea of eternity (figured as history) invests us with a responsibility to affirm only that which we could be willing to live eternally. As Ian F. A. Bell has noted, Williams would almost certainly have encountered Nietzsche’s thinking in the pages of The Little Review, which he read frequently, and which featured George Burman Foster’s expositions of Nietzschean philosophy throughout the nineteen-teens (499). One of Foster’s contributions is a 1914 article entitled “The Nietzschean Love of Eternity,” which not only articulates Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal recurrence in strikingly dynamic, vitalistic terms, “an eternal bond between man and Ever-creative, Ever-reincarnating Life,” but frames this doctrine as part of a history of eternalist

77 The presence of these two elements in Nietzsche’s thinking is not coincidental, given his stated admiration for both Emerson and Spinoza. Nietzsche’s love of Emerson has been the subject of a handful of monographs, the most sustained of which is George J. Stuck’s Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity. See also David Wollenberg’s “Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects.”
thinking that turns on the figure of Spinoza, “who won his deepest insight into life by viewing all things *sub specie aeternitatis*,” (26) or from the perspective of eternity. Williams would not only have encountered Nietzsche in the *Review*, then, but could well have encountered him in this guise, as extending the logical and ethical consequences of Spinoza’s eternalism.

Williams, like Nietzsche, is not so naïve as to claim that we can simply choose to affirm whatever we please—it is not so easy. Rather, Williams suggests throughout *In the American Grain* that we damn ourselves to reliving dangerous pasts if we are complacent enough to believe that that time alone can heal the wounds of historical traumas, or that our choosing a better or more vital past, as intellectuals like Van Wyck Brooks were advocating at the time, is as simple as an exertion of free will. Instead, I argue that Williams seeks a vision of the American past that coheres with Spinoza’s, Emerson’s, and Nietzsche’s understandings of freedom as a product of necessity, a pursuit of new affective responses to the persistent consequences of pasts that do not, and cannot, truly die. He suggests on the one hand that the past is not an uninterrupted or linear progression toward a better, freer future, but a field of problems that must always be integrated anew into a present that has no guaranteed *telos*. Since these harmful pasts already constitute part of the present, we cannot be without them; because we cannot change the content of the past *qua* past, our aim must be to transform its sense or meaning in the present. In short, the effort to produce a livable relation to the past can only be achieved through a restless immanent critique, an analysis from within that cannot be performed from without (an analysis of time that, however rigorous, cannot be performed outside of the structure of time itself). And yet, Williams’s narrative voice tends to undercut the possibility of such an immanent critique,

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78 For more on Nietzsche’s reception in the United States during the early modernist period, see Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen’s *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*. 
inasmuch as it presents itself less as a participant of history than as a force bestriding it, mastering it, perhaps even re-authoring it. Compared to the Stage Manager of Wilder’s *Our Town*, who, despite his meta-dramatic function as commentator on the play’s structure, is nevertheless a character within the play’s world, wholly a part of the community he describes, Williams’s narrative voice, though it presents itself in the role of the artist-historian who articulates the relationships of cause and effect between different historical moments, tends not to scrutinize its own limitations as a narrative authority. This problem is roughly analogous to the auratic separation that Carla Billitteri sees as an integral part of Williams’s literary practice, an “aesthetic ideology that elevates the poet to a plane of existential and epistemological superiority and conceives the relationship between artist and audience in terms of a steep class divide comparable to the divide between aristocracy and populace” (44). Though I do not examine the class implications of this divide, this auratic distancing and privileging of the author-figure from the audience nevertheless impedes Williams’s immanent critique of history here in a way that Wilder avoids. And yet, it is precisely where Williams’s transcendent authorial voice appears most forcefully, where he presents speculation, myth, fancy, and fiction as elements of history (for example, in his account of Ponce de León’s relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico), that *In the American Grain* suggests most strongly that history resists this authorial power by its very nature; it is these most self-consciously contrived, artificial moments that tend to suggest most egregiously, in their very failure to recognize their own situatedness within the historical processes they survey, that the present is an inevitable

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79 Though the artist-historian figure (Williams himself, in this case) briefly appears within the history he narrates in the “Père Sebastian Rasles” chapter of *In the American Grain*, which opens with Williams’s account of his debate about America’s Puritan history with Valéry Larbaud in Paris, this moment is an exception in a text that otherwise tends to present the narrator as the voice of history. In general, though *In the American Grain* presents “a highly selective, impressionistic account of [American] history, the product of [Williams’s] imagination playing over the documents,” as Alan Holder has argued, this deeply personal authorial presence most often remains sufficiently impersonal that it could be mistaken for the transcendent voice of history itself.
product of the historical process. In an oft-quoted passage of his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno writes that “[t]he basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (7). I suggest that we must read Williams’s narrative slippages from critical self-awareness to the transcendence of the artist-historian figure as something like these “immanent problems of form,” inasmuch as the formal contradictions between these two conceptions of the author-function and its relation to the text (the immanent-critical and the transcendent-auratic, the from-within and the from-above) express a real contradiction between dynamic and linear conceptions of historical change.

Williams, like Emerson before him, does not take history to be the opposite of eternity, but practically identical to it. The dynamism that Emerson and Spinoza would ascribe to eternity belongs, in Williams’s practice, to history—a dynamic historicism in which history is both cause and an effect of a conative struggle to affirm a usable past (to borrow the famous phrase of Van Wyck Brooks). Williams imagines a relation of reciprocity between particular temporalities and eternity, or history, and diagnoses the ways that this reciprocity can be corrupted, either by excessively passive approaches to history that understand it as a teleological progression toward preordained ends, or by the excessive pursuit of mastery over history. The result of both approaches is only to reinforce our powerlessness over history’s course and to compel ourselves to repeat and reproduce the dynamics and relations that already exist. *In the American Grain* presents figures who approach history in these ways, only to subject them to an implicit and unwittingly Spinozan critique that manifests itself in the stubborn resistance of the structure of history to teleology and individual mastery alike.
Paul Douglass, whose work on Bergson has helped to illuminate his importance to American writers in particular, argues that the most important gift that Bergson provided to modernism was an account of order emerging out of chaos, of the “contraction” of our individual durations from the shifting multiplicity of the ontological past (174). Bergson’s account of the creativity of duration also provided a convenient model for modernists to conceptualize their own efforts to “make it new,” in the famous dictum of Ezra Pound’s, as each duration is a singular and emergent contraction of a past whose contents are ever changing. Bergson’s philosophy allowed for an understanding of self-alienation, a constant theme among the modernists, as a problem of memory, a self-forgetting or disarticulation of the self from its own duration in time, its own living history, that influenced the poetics of Eliot, Pound, and Wallace Stevens, as well as the emergence of the memory play in the drama of Tennessee Williams and Wilder (Douglass, “Bergson, Vitalism, and Modernist Literature” 121-22). Though Douglass’s account of Bergson’s lure for modernist writers is illuminating, his treatment of William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* is instructive of the ways that the critical focus on Bergson’s legacy tends to obscure competing strains of thinking about time and eternity, and particularly how these strains—or any interest in the dynamic movement of time—tended to be assimilated under the rubric of Bergsonism, whatever its other sources might have been. Douglass speculates that key elements of Williams’s attitude toward art and history suggest the influence of Bergson, from Williams’s rhetoric of “touch” to his emphasis throughout *In the American Grain* on the need to rescue a vital and living past for the sake of the present (167-68). It is undeniable that Bergsonian ideas were “in the air” during the heyday of high modernism and that Williams himself knew many writers who had enthusiastically embraced Bergson’s thought; however, Williams’s letters, essays, and works are surprisingly quiet about him. Considering both the
nativist streak that runs through much of Williams’s writing (which he dramatizes in the “Père Sebastian Rasles” chapter of *In the American Grain*) and his desire to ground American literature in a specifically American idiom and sense of place, it strikes me as unlikely that Williams would have turned to a French philosopher as a source of dynamic thinking about time before first looking for American sources.\(^80\) Were there not more local precedents for these supposedly Bergsonian aspects of Williams’s approach to time, history, and “contact”? The likeliest precedent is Emerson, whose essays are closer models for the sense of time in Williams’s *In the American Grain* than Bergson’s time philosophy. If we view Emerson as a primary source for Williams’s search for a usable past that cannot be found ready-made but must be extracted from history through struggle and invention, it is an unfortunate irony that, by the 1920s, Emerson had for many become “the symbol of a no longer usable past” (Charles E. Mitchell, qtd. in Copestake 63). Ian D. Copestake sketches the decline of Emerson’s reputation in the late twentieth century and into the modernist period, noting the decisive impact of George Santayana’s “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” in cementing Emerson’s reputation as a soft-minded thinker more noteworthy for importing the worst tendencies of European idealism (abstraction and a tendency toward subjectivism) than for devising a philosophy of his own (Copestake 64; Santayana 529-30). Indeed, this is the view of Emerson that both Wilder and Williams appear to have held. Copestake points, for instance, to Williams’s *The Great American Novel* (1923), whose narrator dismisses Transcendentalism’s “complacent Concordites” as slavish imitators of

\(^{80}\) This is not to suggest, of course, that Williams was not influenced by European artists and thinkers. His interest in European visual arts is well documented and treated with aplomb in monographs by Terence Diggory (*William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*) and Ian D. Copestake (Chapter Two of *The Ethics of William Carlos Williams*, “Williams among the Pre-Raphaelites”). Also of relevance is Williams’s veneration of Albert Einstein and Marie Curie, which Lisa M. Steinman documents and analyzes in *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets*. These European influences, though, are instigations—they drive poets to devise new approaches to their work. If Williams judges Emerson harshly for his European influences, it is perhaps because Emerson—unlike, say, Whitman, with whom Williams is more readily associated—did not produce a new or vital poetics from those influences.
English fashion, as having absorbed Santayana’s critique of Emerson as the avatar of the genteel tradition (65). A brief glance at the gendered opposition that Santayana draws between the modern impetus of the American will and the genteel repose of the American intellect is telling: the former is “all aggressive enterprise,” “the sphere of the American man,” whose symbol, appropriately enough, is the phallic public monument of the skyscraper; the latter is the genteel, passive sphere of the American woman, symbolized by the domestic milieu of the colonial mansion (527). And yet, as I will show, although the implicit opposition between willful modernist thinking and genteel Emersonianism certainly holds up, to one degree or another, in the comments that writers like Wilder and Williams make about Emerson, it does not hold up in the ways that Emerson’s thinking gets deployed in their work. Though there is a tendency among the modernists to underplay or erase Emerson’s influence, they do not part with him—rather, he becomes part of them.

If we look to Williams’s *Spring and All* (1923), we find him performing and aggrandizing precisely these aggressive modern “skyscraper” values in the name of the imagination’s apocalyptic powers of regeneration-through-destruction: “The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill […] None to remain; nothing but the lower vertebrates, the mollusks, insects and plants. Then at last will the world be made anew” (5-6). As if to clarify the conception of the imagination that he is proposing to destroy, Williams follows this scene with a parody of Emerson’s Over-Soul: after

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81 While England and its imitators are the targets of Williams’s polemic, the English-ness that he objects to among the Transcendentalists is in fact the German-influenced Romanticism of Coleridge and Carlyle, who were the most significant English influences on the Transcendentalist movement. Thus, Williams’s condemnation of England suggests, in a roundabout way, not only an American hostility to its former colonial overlords, but a nativist suspicion of foreign, non-English influences (even when conveyed by English-speaking writers). In other words, “English” in this context names not only English writers, but what were often understood as non-English, and specifically German, ideas.
the “final and self inflicted holocaust,” all that remains is a vast agglutination, a “soul of souls, watching its own horrid unity [as] it boils and digests itself within the tissues of the great Being of Eternity that we shall then have become” (6). The language recalls Santayana’s declaration in his essay that the tradition of Poe, Hawthorne, and Emerson “was employed on a sort of inner play, or digestion of vacancy” (529, my emphasis). Curiously, though Williams in many ways follows Santayana’s criticisms of Emerson, he has no such reservations about Poe, whom he lauds in one of the chapters of In the American Grain. Though Poe was himself no less susceptible to European influence than Emerson, he had the benefit of having been received enthusiastically in France by the likes of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, who in turn were admired by many of Williams’s modernist contemporaries. There was almost surely a strategic dimension to Williams’s distancing himself from Emerson while embracing Poe: in the context of Santayana’s critique, returning to Emerson would mean acknowledging a debt to England and Germany, whereas returning to Poe meant reminding Europe and modernism alike of their debts to America.

Yet, as I will argue in a section to come, Williams is closer to Spinoza and Emerson than he might have imagined when he objects to the self-digesting “horrid unity” in Spring and All, particularly if we consider that Williams’s early Five Philosophical Essays more often echo the Emerson of Nature than anything of Poe’s.82 Given Williams’s hostility to the abstractions of idealism (“no ideas but in things”) and his reliance on a rhetoric of (typically male) aggression and creative violence, one might expect him to echo Santayana’s dismissal of Emerson in favour

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82 According to Ron Loewinsohn, Williams probably composed these essays over the course of the early 1910s (xxii-xxiii). They are appended to the end of The Embodiment of Knowledge, a collection of broadly philosophical fragments, notes, and short essays of Williams’s, mostly from the 1920s; in this format, the stylistic gap between Williams’s 1920s style and the Emersonian rhetoric of the Philosophical Essays is striking. What is especially noteworthy about this shift, though, is that it does not involve a repudiation of Emersonian content (particularly the need to discover a livable or vital relation to the past).
of some version of the skyscraper ethos, such as he appears to give in the well-known introduction to his 1944 volume *The Wedge*, which defines the poem as a “machine made of words” (53). Though Williams here sets up an especially Santayana-like opposition between the bloodless, effete abstraction of “the metaphysical” and the unsentimental, hard physicality of the poem-machine, Alec Marsh has nevertheless argued that Williams’s work continues to express the influence of Emerson. “What is interesting in Emerson and what makes him relevant to Williams,” Marsh claims, “is not spirit as a transcendental ideal, but power” (7). The Emerson that animates Williams, in other words, is not the one dismissed by Santayana, but the one that appealed so strongly to Nietzsche. Williams’s work often suggests, in a palpably Emersonian and Nietzschean fashion, that the conflictual interplay of forces is a motor for difference and change, a processual recasting of the world.83 While Santayana and many of his contemporaries might associate Emerson with a static conception of eternity opposed contrary to the more dynamic eternalism found in Nietzsche, Emerson’s thinking is in fact one of the precedents of this dynamic position. Though Williams likely found it impossible to affirm Emerson directly, his attempts to formulate a conflictual and dynamic conception of eternity cannot help but affirm a similar strain in Emerson’s thinking. While Williams’s earlier works also echo, in their rhetorical aggression, the spirit of the “skyscraper” modernity that Santayana opposes to the genteel tradition, Copestake argues, and I agree, that here, too, Williams absorbs a great deal from Emerson, especially considering the latter’s importance in conceiving of and defending the “nativist culture” in American letters that Williams helps to develop in works such as *Spring and All* and *In the American Grain* (Copestake 70). The disavowal of Emerson by the early Williams

83 My reading of Williams does not presume a Hegelian dialecticism, despite obvious rhetorical similarities to Hegel’s emphasis on the creative role of negation. Though it is difficult to avoid conjuring this association when describing conflict as a motor for change, I see Williams’s position as being non-progressive and non-teleological, contrary to Hegel.
and his modernist contemporaries had long closed off serious critical consideration of Emerson as a fore-runner to literary modernism; while that deficit has been repaid to some degree, one of its unfortunate consequences has been that critics tend to overlook Emerson’s role not only in transmitting Spinoza’s ideas, but in repackaging and transforming them, in producing a self-subverting idealism that tended toward the processual or vital materialism that more recent philosophers, from Deleuze to Jane Bennett, have discovered in Spinoza.

To read the Emersonian content of Williams’s and, for that matter, Wilder’s temporal views as Bergsonian is to perpetuate an unwitting muting of the Emersonian and Spinozan notes of modernism. Moreover, this perspective suggests an ahistorical account of American modernism in which Bergson’s process philosophy of time is a bolt out of the blue, a sudden irruption of the new into the otherwise uninitiated American imagination. Though Bergson provides a new language for thinking about time, this language is not without its relations—it is no isolate. Bergson himself acknowledges this fact in a well-known essay, “Philosophical Intuition,” which concludes with a kind of translation between the language of duration and that of eternity. Bergson suggests that we move from seeing the universe *sub specie aeternitatis* (in the famous phrase of Spinoza’s *Ethics*) to seeing it *sub specie durationis* (from the perspective of duration), and that such a change would reveal a world “whose eternity is not to be an eternity of immutability, but an eternity of life” (106). However, as Baugh has argued, Spinoza does not actually commit himself to the conflation of time with measure that Bergson sees as resulting in static eternalism; for Spinoza, duration “is real, and is not the measurable span of time that a thing exists, but its power of existence for as long as it exists” (Baugh 230). The philosopher Horace Kallen went so far in his 1914 study *William James and Henri Bergson* as to declare that Spinoza’s “Substance, Nature, God, is the same interpenetration of diversities, the same
uncompelled *spontaneous activity*” as Bergson’s own *élan vital* (109). Though Bergson clearly recognized the parallels between his and Spinoza’s thinking, at least by the time of the “Philosophical Intuition” essay, it was perhaps strategically necessary to cast Spinoza as a thinker of stasis in order to preserve the novelty of Bergsonism. More importantly, though, especially in terms of the popular view of Bergsonism as opposed to Spinozism (what little popular sense there was of the latter), it was rhetorically significant to do so, since Bergson’s system gives explicit emphasis to relations in time in a way that Spinoza’s does not. In this, Bergson is correct: Spinoza’s sense of time derives from his sense of causation. Bergson, on the contrary, offered a theory in which time itself was the primary matter of concern. His comment on eternity in “Philosophical Intuition” conceals the fact that for Spinoza (as for Emerson), the effort to think through eternity had always been an attempt to pierce the concept’s shell of immutability to find the living germ within it; it had always been an effort not unlike Bergson’s, of restoring movement to a petrified and ancient conception of eternity as the negation of time and change. Similarly, though critics are right to note that Bergson’s philosophy allowed modernists to conceive of the individual as an emergent form produced by the creative synthesis of pasts and present, Emerson had already defined the individual in an analogous, albeit less elaborated sense, in the 1841 essay “History,” where he declares that “[man] is the compend of time; he is also the correlative of nature. His power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being” (254).

Despite Emerson’s commitment to the rather old-fashioned term “eternity,” he employs the term to name something creative and vital, as does Spinoza. But my motivations for turning

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84 As I note later in this chapter, Kallen is better remembered today for conceptualizing and coining the term “cultural pluralism.”
to these thinkers, rather than to Bergson, are not strictly antiquarian. On the contrary, I argue that it is meaningful to preserve eternity *qua* eternity, rather than *qua* duration, to use the Spinozan and Emersonian language rather than the Bergsonian. To do so is to emphasize the status of eternity as a self-organizing, emergent structure, and to sketch a metaphysical picture in which the status of human freedom and the centrality of human beings is always deeply suspect (consider that Emerson, despite his reputation as the prophet of self-reliance and individuality, retained a version of fatalism throughout his career).

To be clear, Bergson’s own ideas are not necessarily contrary to this position; however, as Mary A. Gillies has recently noted, most non-philosophers and writers of the early 20th century were adherents less of Bergson than of “Bergsonism,” the body of simplifications, corruptions, and distortions that grew up around his vocabulary (26). In supposedly making human beings “the central object of the universe and [rendering] unto them absolute control over their own fate as well as that of the world,” Bergsonism offered writers a sense of traction in a universe that modern science increasingly suggested was controlled by “an unseen set of natural forces controlling human destiny” (26). Whatever the actual status of Bergson’s relationship to Spinozan eternalism, then, his popular reputation suggested that his philosophy was a route to starkly different conclusions. To think through duration, for adherents of this vulgarized Bergsonism, was to enshrine a notion of creative evolution that seemed to offer unconditional freedom; to think through eternity, in contrast, was to accept the precept that there exists no unconditioned freedom from the structure of time, and that any intervention in that structure is necessarily conditioned by the very thing it attempts to alter. What it means to say that Wilder and Williams, then, are interested in dynamic eternalism, is that they are interested in exploring
the range and limits of art’s power to act in a world where the structure of relations between things is a primary and determinative fact through which any freedom must be thought.

I take Emerson to be the inflection point by which this eternalism of dynamic structure becomes available to American literary traditions. I aim to show three things: firstly, that this eternalism does not sacrifice a dynamic vision of the universe, as Bergson suggests; secondly, that Emerson animates key elements of this eternalist view that are mostly latent in Spinoza and passes them on to the modernists; and thirdly, that a sub-set of American modernists adopt the dynamic eternalist perspective because it provides an alternative to theological and transcendent versions of eternity while allowing for an ethical vision rooted in an understanding of the eternal as the fabric woven between various temporalities, different kinds of temporal existence, which may or may not be continuous with one another.

What hangs in the balance, though, in preserving and reimagining the concept of eternity? Eternity bears upon the very meaning of the concepts of progress and freedom. Spinoza's eternalism gives us an orientation that refuses the unidirectional logic of progress without refusing the reality of change; because Spinoza’s ethic is rooted in discovering adequate knowledge of causal and not temporal relationships, there is no intrinsic link between time and progress. Though there remains a certain kind of progress implicit in the development of greater degrees of causal knowledge, this progress is non-teleological—it has no end to limit it. Spinoza's dynamic eternalism also entails a version of freedom that does not depend on free will, but rather emphasizes the fact that our powers of agency over the past, or over history, are shaped and often sharply curtailed by the relations that we have with others, and even by the pasts that continue to impinge on the present. I argue that Spinoza's thinking gives us an alternative way of imagining time that resists the quietistic narratives of historical, cultural, and
technological progress that allow us to live complacently in a present that we are certain will improve. It asks us to examine instead whose interests have determined the temporalities that we affirm as part of the in-dwelling cause of our present. Williams deploys a similar logic in his efforts to deflate the pretensions of the white European “discoverers” of America to being privileged agents of progress, as does Wilder in *Our Town*, where the advancement of industrial capitalism lurks conspicuously in the background, threatening to subjugate the dynamic eternity of Grover’s Corners to a conception of history as the story of capitalist progress that takes capital as the end-state and *telos* of history.

Spinoza’s eternity is unique, since its function is not primarily theological (it grounds no afterlife and no particular cosmology) but expresses only the *causa immanens* (or immanent cause) of time: all that exists temporally does so as “a complex connection of durations,” “the effects of endless encounters between [temporal] rhythms” (Morfino 149). These rhythms are not free in themselves, as their existence depends on being determined to exist—or not—in a certain temporal register. In this sense, Spinoza asserts the primacy of necessity over freedom, as far as time is concerned. To be free in time is first of all to understand the way that time itself is woven, and moreover that it can only be woven in a certain way—it is to know the necessary conditions that have shaped the present. In contrast, Bergson rejects the concept of cause as imprecise and as leading, in Spinoza’s metaphysics, to the absorption of relations of temporal succession into relations of inherence, or the simultaneity of cause and effect (*Time and Free Will* 208). And

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85 It is worth noting that Kallen explicitly contradicts this significant distinction that Bergson draws between his own durational theory, which preserves temporal succession, and Spinoza’s causal theory, which allegedly entails the simultaneity of all moments. Kallen recognizes precisely the nuance that Bergson overlooks, defining Spinoza’s substance as “an *effect* which is its own *cause*; the self-identity of the different; the simultaneity of the successive” (109-10). It is not the case, as Bergson has it, that Spinoza dissolves succession with simultaneity, but that he overlays simultaneity upon successive time. It is within the infinite substance of God, the *causa immanens* that is simultaneous with all of its effects, that finite modes enter into successive relations in time.
yet, both thinkers agree, as Baugh puts it, that “[d]uration is not divisible into parts […] and it is not a sum of moments, but an indivisible force of existence” (224-25). By my reading of Spinoza, “cause” is only the name for the active aspect of this force of existence (as opposed to “effect,” its passive aspect). Crucially, it is also by conceiving of all things as constituted and bound together by the ontological activity of causation that Spinoza conceives of eternity as a collective relation. While Bergson’s anti-causalism and emphasis on free will ensured that he could be popularly (though not quite accurately) received as a defender of individualism, Spinoza’s staunch determinism and emphasis on interwoven causal relations precluded any such appropriations of his philosophy. In Spinoza, what is immanent to any given moment is not any one modality of time, but rather the “connexio” “of bodies, traces, images, ideas, words, practices, passions, usages and customs, habits, beliefs, rituals, apparatuses, institutions, conflicts and resistances” (Morfino 15-16). Or, as Baugh puts it, “time is implicated in eternity and eternity is implicated in time” (230).

Spinoza’s thinking about time entails conceiving of ethical activity as the practice, construction, and invention of a mode of freedom by investigating those conditions that restrict and limit it—that is, an investigation of what freedom is possible in a world of conditions. Eternity is the interweaving of a coherent reality from the non-contemporaneous temporalities or powers of existence that constitute the immanent or indwelling cause, that is, “God or nature” (Baugh 230; Waller 17). As I note above, the eternal is not a different world, but the structure of the only world. From a Spinozan perspective, our freedom relates directly to this structure; we are only as free as our causes allow, inasmuch as our circumstances connect us to determinate powers of action. The implicit ethical question is of what kinds of collective action are possible sub specie aeternitatis, given the immanent structure of time. Any ethical activity must begin
from an analysis of what causes us and, by extension, what hems us in and limits us. Since substance, or eternity, is in excess of us by definition, it “never falls under the infinite intellect as one object among many, but as a complex relationship between objects (namely, as connexio)” (Morfino 152). In this sense, eternity is also collective; we can have no practical power over it as isolated individuals. It is this that makes a Spinozan eternalism especially applicable to the texts that I examine in this chapter. Spinoza’s freedom is the collective’s synthesis of a single reality—the one world that it is possible for us to inhabit, given a particular weaving of temporalities. Eternity is not without history—on the contrary, from a certain perspective, it is history, the extra-temporal structure of the necessary relations that makes temporal existence possible. If it is a necessary structure, it is not, for all that, an immutable one, although individuals have little power to change it by their own efforts. This is its guise in the understated complexity of the different temporal levels of Wilder’s *Our Town* and the creative literary history of Williams’s *In the American Grain*, where there is no history of the whole, no grand movement of world-spirit animated by a single *telos* or thread of reason that, if properly interpreted, would yield the secrets of historical progression; as Morfino puts it, Spinozan eternity means that “it is not possible to speak about history in general, only about forms of ‘specific structures of historicity’” (163). We must search for these specific structures and the modes of sociability, of being-with and being-part-of others, that they make practicable. In *Our Town*, Wilder uses his dynamic eternalism to articulate a mode of community that is neither organicist (subsuming parts into a whole) nor filial (dependent on relations of kinship or immediate relation), and thus refuses the naïve, nostalgic, and romanticized versions of small-town life that often depend on these organicist or filial models. Wilder’s town of Grover’s Corners is nothing less than the *connexio* of different temporalities that are woven together in a
singular kind of existence, that constitutes a historicity of its own, a variable and dynamic
eternity that is nothing other than a living immanence; however, to the extent that Wilder’s play
avoids dealing directly with the problem of historical violence and its inherence in the present, it
offers a relatively less complex articulation of dynamic eternalism than Williams does
throughout *In the American Grain*, which is vexed at every turn by the problem of violence.
While Wilder focuses primarily on the experiences of small-town life early in the twentieth
century, Williams points to instances of mass violence and conquest across American history as
structural elements of the specific historicity of 1920s America and asks what alternate histories
might be constructed from those givens. Though Williams’s narrative ultimately reaffirms the
inevitability of the historical trajectory that produced 1920s America, it performs the inability of
the individual will—particularly the mastering will of the artist-historian—to reweave the
*connexio* of history in isolation, and thus suggests that any effort to condition the structure of
history must be undertaken collectively and must abandon the Romantic paradigm of the writer-as-hero.

Now that I have discussed the stakes of a dynamic eternalism, it is necessary to examine
the cultural contexts in which the question of eternity and its relationship to lived, dynamic time
takes on significance for modernist literature. The shift in modern understandings of time is
typically framed as an expansion or pluralization of times, or what Tim Armstrong calls “the
dynamization of temporality” (9). Though a multitude of factors conditioned this pluralization, it
is possible to isolate three primary sources of disruption. The first of these corresponds to what
Hartog Rosa terms technical acceleration, or the rapid development of transport and
communications technologies in the wake of a quickening industrialization, which produced an
economization of time and an *ethos* of efficiency to which Henry Ford’s assembly lines and F.
W. Taylor’s “scientific management” of the workplace were only the most conspicuous contributors (Rosa 97-98; Armstrong 129). If the mass production of the mechanical clock in the nineteenth century initially had the effect, as Rosa argues, of decoupling time and space by releasing the former from reference to visible spatial features such as the movement of stars and the changing of the seasons, then such sweeping renovations in physics as Einsteinian relativity, which insisted on the recoupling of space and time, could scarcely have been less than revolutionary, since its declaration of the fluidity and variability of “real” time also insinuated the artificiality of the chronological or measurable time of business and industry (Rosa 98; Armstrong 116). The developments in relativity and quantum theory in the twentieth century, taken together with the conceptualization of geological and evolutionary timescales in the science of the nineteenth century, make up a second disruption that conditioned modernity’s dynamic sense of time. A similar distinction between clock time and lived time provided the polemical weight of Bergson’s philosophy, in which chronological time is only a second-order determination of the essential flux of time for the purposes of empirical measurement and convenience. The critical philosophy of time to which Bergson and such contemporaries as Samuel Alexander, William James, and Alfred North Whitehead contributed is the third disruption in the modern understanding of time. These disruptions in the technical, scientific, and philosophical spheres are hardly the only ones to have assailed received notions of time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they are among the most significant. Together, they produced a modernity of “split and uneven temporalities,” struggling on the one hand to free itself from a primitive or outmoded past and on the other to distinguish usable elements of that past from those elements that haunt the present and threaten to make the future into a ceaseless rendition of what has already passed (Armstrong 5, 9-12). If the dynamization of time is one of
the hallmark features of modernity, as Armstrong suggests, we would expect an equally dynamic range of responses and attitudes from the modernist writers who responded to this new sense of temporality (9). While some modernists met the sense of the imminent irruption of the past and future into the present with anxiety or ambivalence (consider Eliot’s search for order in the curatorial assemblage of fragments of the literary canon in *The Waste Land*), for others it was a source of more marked disdain, an assault on the very possibility of art (as in Wyndham Lewis’s attack on the “time-cult” in *Time and Western Man*); for others still, the uneven temporalities of modernity were potentially curative, an opportunity to re-consecrate a damaged present by bringing it into new kinds of contact with the pasts that haunt it (Hart Crane’s grandiose American mythopoeia in *The Bridge*, the mythopoeic syncretism of H. D.’s *Trilogy*, or the modernist primitivism of Hughes’s poetry of the ‘20s and ‘30s).

This emphasis on the pluralization of time, though, threatens to obscure the fact that modernists continued to write under the sway of a conception of eternity (whether they realized it or not), despite the challenges to its philosophical validity. Before the nineteenth century, the problem of time was closely bound up with that of eternity; in this traditional eternalism, the essential contrast was not between times plural, but rather between immanent time and the transcendent timelessness on which it supposedly depended. This is the mode of temporality that Augustine famously defines in book XI of the *Confessions*, where time is what distinguishes creation from the eternal figure of the creator, whose “silent and eternal” Word animates and preserves all creation (258). For Augustine, the problem of time is theological: how can we, as created beings in a world that seems riven at every moment by variation, change, and inconsistency, assert coherently that there is a God whose power is infinite and whose existence is eternal? The aim, in other words, is to safeguard the eternal from “the havoc of change,” to
provide a solid and unyielding foundation for morality and theology (279). Eternity casts an anchor into creation to remind it that it has always been transcended—that there is a world above, not of the fluid and variegated waves of passing time, but of the sharp and lasting clarity of air. To that end, a preservative or redemptive impulse motivates Augustine’s eternalism, with its banishment of time into the subjective realm; here, the reality of time retracts into the present moment, as the past becomes nothing more than a memory of presents that, now gone, no longer exist but as impressions on the mind, and the future becomes only a sense of expectation that is meaningless without the present from which the expectation radiates (276). In other words, Augustine’s eternalist view of God entails a presentist view of creation: this very moment is the one that matters most and is the only one with ontological weight.

The correlation between presentism and eternity would prove vexatious for many modernists. On the one hand, modernity was not kind to the concept of eternity, which seemed outmoded after trenchant critiques by the likes of Bergson, who saw it as antithetical to the dynamism of lived time, and Heidegger, for whom it was the basis of the West’s misguided “ontotheological” approach to metaphysics. On the other hand, in practice it was difficult to throw off the vestiges of eternity. The philosophies of Bergson and others helped to fuel a desire among novelists and poets to create new forms of literary expression that would be more adequate to the dynamic nature of time, but these efforts often ended up reaffirming the old eternity with new rhetoric. While static eternalism denies the reality of time and change altogether, presentism nominally accepts change, but not the passage of time (Bardon 85). The most noteworthy examples of these efforts are the presentist poetries of Williams and Pound,

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86 I will engage with Bergson’s criticisms of eternity shortly. Heidegger, for his part, argues that eternity is an unintelligible concept since our perceptions are always finite and grounded in time. For a critical account of Heidegger’s argument, see Lilian Alweiss, “Heidegger and ‘The Concept of Time’.”
which strove to supersede the static eternalism of Augustine by capturing the vitality and movement of time, only to reassert that eternity under a different sign. In believing that it has escaped the forest of an eternity where nothing happens, presentism only assigns a different name to the same trees; presentist poetries ultimately fall upon the paradox of their efforts to express the living vibrancy of a passing moment in an eternalized and aestheticized present that does not pass. Nevertheless, this failure is instructive, as it suggests that there was something about the concept of eternity that many modernists would not or could not disavow. One unlikely place that this impulse appears is amidst the contradictions that arise from Pound’s famous imperative to “make it new.” These contradictions are most obvious in a comment of Pound’s in The New Age, in which he describes the “new form” as “energy cut into stone” (qtd. in Rasula 715): the immediacy of stone, its insistent quality of being here and now, must be animated with the suggestion of movement, vibrancy, luminosity. The “new,” in other words, flashes into being in a moment that must be preserved—cut into stone, as it were—but only on the condition that what is preserved is the energy of innovation-in-motion, which is to say, that which cannot be preserved in stone (eternalized) without ceasing to be in motion and in time. Later, under the influence of Ernest Fenollosa, Pound will propose the ideogram as a model for poetry using a similar logic, aiming at the creation of images that capture both the static, concrete thing plus its motion or action, the immediacy in which an image can function as both a noun and a verb (Armstrong 133). The contradiction that Pound attempts to surmount, in other words, is that of capturing something both in and out of time, the vital, self-sufficient fullness of a passing moment that for a moment does not pass, that belongs in time and gives off the sense of that belonging, but that the poem places and elevates onto the dais of the timeless present.
Another example of a presentism that remained mired in and fascinated by certain aspects of eternity is Williams’s early poetry, with its commitment to a poetics that attends both to its own locality and to objects. This commitment is analogous to Pound’s in the following sense: by capturing the immediate presence of the object, or the immediacy of the place, Williams aims to supersede not only any artificial separation between the idea of the object and the object itself (“no ideas but in things”), but between the immediate experience of the object and its embodiment in the language of a poem. In order to achieve this simultaneity of experience and its expression, this coincidence, even identity, of the poem with the experience that produces it, Williams often relies on producing a poetic space in which “many actions are going on at once in a perpetual present,” as J. Hillis Miller remarks of the late poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (301). Neither Pound nor Williams make any explicit appeal to eternity, but their efforts to resolve stasis and dynamism in the immediacy of the present image grapple nonetheless with the same dichotomy as Augustine in the *Confessions*, between the “silent and eternal” Word and “the havoc of change,” and, insofar as they assert an almost mystical bridging of the static and the dynamic, these presentist projects risk falling into one side or the other of the dichotomy. There is much less distance between these poetries and eternalism than there might appear. Williams’s *Kora In Hell* (1920) and *Spring and All* (1923) capture at the level of form the tension that animates presentist poetry: in the former work, Williams often pairs his opaque “improvisations” with italicized notes that explain for the reader (though often no less opaquely) what the preceding improvisation depicts. The effect of reading one after the other is of a rhythmic alternation between the hurried, exclamatory pace of the improvisation, which is often markedly paratactic, and the calmer repose and hypotaxis of the annotations. The dynamic continues in *Spring and All*, where Williams alternates between imagistic poems, often with
short, jarringly broken lines, and prose passages that force the eye to linger as it follows the lines across the breadth of the page. The dynamics of alternation in both works suggest an aesthetic effort to express under the unifying sign of an individual work both the fleeting perceptions of the present moment and the unfolding of those perceptions in the more relaxed, hypotactic passages of annotation (*Kora in Hell*), or by the visual breadth of prose on the page compared to the compacted poetic lines (*Spring and All*). In short, there is in these two works a formal analogue—albeit a rough one—to presentism’s paradoxical commitment to depicting both the vitality of the briefest moment of time and the timeless expanse of eternity that nourishes and sustains that moment beyond itself. These works are of interest to me because they evoke a presentism that is missing from *In the American Grain*; while much of Williams’s poetry strikes a presentist note, I see the experimental, imaginative history of *In the American Grain* as embodying an alternative, dynamic eternalism indebted to Emerson and, by extension, to Spinoza, which evades the pitfalls and paradoxes to which his presentist poetry is vulnerable.\(^8\)

In order to clarify what a poetry of Spinozan or dynamic eternalism would look like, we must also show how it differs from poetry that affirms a static version of the eternal. What vexes presentist poetry is its desire to express the timely in the fashion of the timeless—it aims to elevate the earthly moment into the transcendent while claiming to have dragged the transcendent down to earth. By conserving the pretensions of art to transcendence, it dooms its own effort to think of time as vital or emergent, whereas eternalist poetry shares presentism’s desire to recuperate the sense of art’s transcendence but eschews its aim of doing so by making the transcendent earthly. Take the example of Crane’s poem sequence *The Bridge*. Crane

\(^8\) It bears mentioning here that the same ambiguities can be found in Emerson’s writings, where there is often an oscillation between presentism and a variety of dynamic eternalism.
encourages readers to interpret the eponymous arch-symbol as a link between the temporal and the eternal, as “One arc synoptic of all tides below” (72). This link is especially clear in the transition from the sequence’s proem to its coda, from “To Brooklyn Bridge” to “Atlantis,” which takes the reader from the earthly New York City to a rediscovered and eternalized version of the Atlantis of Platonic myth. Another modernist engagement with eternity, and the one most explicitly indebted to Augustine, is Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” which opens the Four Quartets. Here, redeploying Augustine’s propositions on the timelessness of the Word of God, Eliot affirms that only God’s love, which is itself timeless and unmov ing, though time and movement arise from it, can redeem a present from a past and a future that would otherwise be nothing but waste (182). Eliot’s eternalism even expresses its own version of the tension between stasis and dynamism that animates the presentist poetics of the early Pound and Williams, in the poem’s concluding meditation on what it means for God’s eternal love to be embodied in a temporal world, “in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being” (“Burnt Norton” 182). What Eliot, Pound, Crane, and Williams (to a point) share in their approaches to time, for all their differences otherwise, is a sense that the passage of time, or even the simultaneous plurality of times, becomes operative only when it is suspended and transcended, either in the arrested timelessness of the aestheticized moment (Pound and Williams, in their presentist modes) or by being dissolved into a theological eternity that might infuse the temporal with lasting meaning (Crane and Eliot). In the former case, the poem’s mystical gesture, its flickering transcendence in which time and eternity pass back and forth, cannot be maintained beyond the crystallizing instant; it falls back into time, or else apotheosizes the moment out of it. In the latter case, the poem can only be either an imaginary enactment of a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal or a promissory note that such a synthesis will one day be realized in a transcendent act.
Before recovering Spinoza's dynamic eternalism in a way that could offer an alternative to presentism and static eternalism, it is necessary to explore how it resists the charges typically made against it. The most damaging of these were the charges of acosmism and mechanism. The former, advanced most notably by Hegel, claims that all diversity collapses in Spinoza’s system into identity with an absolute that is eternally the same—in a phrase, it sacrifices the reality of change in the name of the absolute oneness of God (Melamed 69). In Creative Evolution, Bergson advances a similar critique that characterizes Spinoza as a mechanist for whom all things operate by definite and predictable physical laws, as though nature were a piece of clockwork. Mechanism, Bergson argues, can only account for time by analyzing into discrete and measurable units. “Radical mechanism,” he writes, “implies a metaphysic in which the totality of the real is postulated complete in eternity, and in which the apparent duration of things expresses merely the infirmity of a mind that cannot know everything at once” (Creative Evolution 39). Later in his text, Bergson offers an appreciative survey of the idiosyncrasies of Spinoza and Leibniz, but ultimately concludes that “For both, reality as well as truth are integrally given in eternity. Both are opposed to the idea of a reality that creates itself gradually, that is, at bottom, to an absolute duration” (354) The criticisms of acosmism and mechanism are in essence one and the same. They stand or fall together. Both stem from Spinoza’s definition of substance as positively infinite since an infinite thing is also by definition immeasurable and impossible to analyze into discrete parts. The difficulty of answering the criticisms of Hegel and Bergson, which if true will make Spinozism quite useless as a template for thinking about time, is that there are passages in Spinoza’s occasionally labyrinthine corpus that appear to support them. In a letter to Lodewijk Meyer, Spinoza declares that “Substance is not manifold; rather there exists only one Substance of the same nature” (Complete Works 788). This is the
fundamental claim of Spinoza’s monism, that there is one substrate underlying all that is. But does this claim justify saying that everything in that substrate is one? In other words, is it legitimate to leap from saying that there is only one kind of substance to saying that substance itself is one, that all of its modifications are, in essence, one? One could be forgiven for concluding as much when Spinoza goes on to declare that “it is nonsense, bordering on madness, to hold that extended Substance is composed of parts or bodies really distinct from one another” (788). Extended space is properly indivisible, suggesting that the discrete bodies we perceive in it are only “aids to the imagination”: they may be practically necessary, but they distort what space actually is (789). This error applies equally to time, which Spinoza equates with measurement or the analysis of a given duration into discrete moments (Bennett 203-04). Not unlike Bergson, Spinoza conceives of eternity as the indefinite persistence-in-existing of a given mode; unlike Bergson, though, Spinoza derives his duration from his conception of eternity, to which he ascribes “the infinite enjoyment of existence,” or infinite duration (Complete Works 788). If the Meyer letter contained all that Spinoza had to say on the topic of substance’s eternity, the criticisms of Hegel, Bergson, among others, would be persuasive indeed: the plurality of bodies appears as only a useful fiction, as does the time of measure; without discrete bodies, it seems as though substance really does condense into an unchanging one-ness, while the modes themselves seem suspended in the uninterrupted duration of eternity. In the one-space and one-time of eternal substance, everything is still.

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88 This position contrasts with that of Bergson, for whom the cardinal sin of classical metaphysics is to have used space, or quantitative multiplicity, as the model for its conceptions of time, or qualitative multiplicity (Key Writings 85). While the former is properly divisible, the latter is not. It is important to note that Spinoza here is suggesting that neither space nor time are properly divisible.
The Meyer letter, of course, is not Spinoza’s final word. In 1674, about a decade after the letter to Meyer and about two years before he would finally complete the *Ethics*, Spinoza addresses a remarkable letter to Jarig Jelles which provides the most definitive rebuke to those who would later follow the Hegelian and Bergsonian criticisms against him. These criticisms depend on showing that Spinoza believes that only “the one” is real. Presuming these claims were true, one would be surprised to read Spinoza declare that “he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him very improperly” and that “a thing can be called one or single only in respect of its existence, not of its essence” (*Complete Works* 892). This latter claim is crucial and requires some elaboration. The essence of a thing is nothing other than its power to keep existing: the *conatus*, the impetus that drives it to persist in existing (*Ethics* III.P7; Poppa 287). Since essence is only striving, it is not immutable; rather, it is defined by what it can do, which is to say by extension that a thing’s essence is defined by the limitations it encounters. It is in this sense that others are responsible for and are the causes of my essence: they limit me and form the boundaries of what I am capable of doing, of how I am capable of existing. Essence cannot be single or one because it is by definition the multitude of forces that together cause us to exist. But does God not have an existence that could still be called singular? In the letter to Jelles, Spinoza denies this too, claiming that “a thing can not be called one or single unless another thing has been conceived which […] agrees with it.”

For two things to agree, they must first of all be able to affect one another; they must be able to have a reciprocal causal relationship in which neither term is destroyed. Since Spinoza defines God’s essence as an infinite power of existing, no such relationship is possible between God (or substance) and

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89 The language of agreement here does not violate the more granular picture of essence that I have provided, if by “agree” we understand the relation between the conative entity and another like it, which would limit its ability to act.
anything else—the infinite is by definition illimitable (Ethics I.Def.2-6). God *qua* substance (as opposed to God *qua* mode) cannot be directly affected. God is neither one in essence nor in existence; its essence is not-one because nothing hems it in or is capable of limiting it. If Bergson, for example, argues that measurement distorts the real, continuous nature of time by reducing its qualitative or intensive multiplicity into quantity or extension, he cannot rightly charge Spinoza with reducing all things into a simple, single substance. Since there are no externalities in Spinoza’s metaphysics that could equal substance, since there is only substance and nothing to limit it, it must be essentially and existentially numberless. Likewise, since its essence is infinite power of existence, it enacts that power by bringing infinitely many modes of existence into being, and so “[t]o say there is a single substance is to speak from the imagination that can only consider the absolute negatively” (Macherey 104). *Pace* Hegel and Bergson, substance is not the simple oneness into which all places and times converge but is rather an infinite ontological engine. Were substance a simple unity, it would be localized (and thus spatialized) into a somewhere-in-particular; but it is nothing other than the real illimitability of the ontological fabric—it is both being and the infinitude of its becomings.

One could well reply that to the above that it remains unclear how Spinoza thinks that an infinitely productive eternity actually manifests itself in time—how, in other words, does a supposedly illimitable power assume limited form? How do we move from one “level” to another? It would seem again that if Spinoza can provide no mechanism for this movement, then Hegel and Bergson have been right all along and the dynamic eternalism that I hope to trace from Spinoza into American modernism via Emerson is bankrupt. And yet, a question phrased in these terms would already have freighted Spinoza with assumptions he does not make—namely, that there really are levels of time. Spinoza rejects any notion of a hierarchy or a gradation of
time, as one finds in the Augustinian or theological tradition of eternalism. The Augustinian universe becomes less real as one descends from eternity into time, from God into creation. For Augustine, there is a sharp distinction between the perfection of God and that of creation; creation partakes of God, but there remains a distinction of kind between the two terms. Spinoza’s God, though, is an immanent cause. In this kind of causality, there is a relation of “inherence” between an effect and its cause. The effect does not pass from one object into another in a linear sequence, as in Hume’s famous example of one billiard ball striking another, but remains wholly within the cause; hence, the cause is immanent to its effects—it continues to suffuse them, to constitute them. But the opposite must also be true—if the effects are produced into the cause, so to speak, then the very activity of immanent causation must involve the processual modification of the immanent cause. If eternity necessitates the actualization of a multiplicity of times, the multiplicity of times continues to act on eternity itself; still more radically, eternity and time, substance and its modes, form a circle of reciprocity. If eternity constitutes time, time in a sense also constitutes eternity, which is now nothing other than the ontological structure that at once necessitates and is made necessary by the concrete realities that inhabit it (Morfino 5-7). The consequences of this circular scheme of immanence are so great that Deleuze claims Spinoza’s immanentism was “undoubtedly the most dangerous theme” in the history of philosophy: “Treating God as an emanative cause [as Augustine does, in a broad sense] can fit [traditional philosophy] because there is still the distinction between cause and effect. But [treating God] as immanent cause, such that we no longer know very well how to distinguish cause and effect, that is to say treating God and the creature the same, that becomes much more difficult” (“Spinoza: 25/11/1980”). Just as cause and effect flatten onto one another, so too do eternity and time. Gone is the temporality of the “top-down” Augustinian universe, in
which eternity is the sole locus of reality and time is only its degraded form; in Spinoza’s universe, eternity requires an infinity of concrete realizations, which follow from the essence of an eternal thing (the infinite power of existence). This scheme produces the infinity of concrete actualities (including any number of temporalities) in a strictly immanent relationship to the eternal. And yet, though Spinoza’s eternity collapses any hierarchical relationship of between time and eternity, it does not reduce them to a mere identity. We must not understand eternity as preceding time; instead, it is the power that allows the pluralism of time. Eternity, Morfino argues, is nothing less than time’s non-contemporaneity, “the articulation of a plurality of durations and at the same time the guarantee of the impossibility of hypostatization of one [temporal] rhythm in relation to the others” (15-16). This dynamic eternity is Morfino’s connexio or weave between temporal elements: a structure existing “above” time but not beyond it, not truly transcendent to it, constituted only in the actual weaving-together of different moments into a synchronic non-contemporaneity, a composition of non-continuous times (15-16, 152). Eternity is the structure of a world in which time is possible; it is the fact that any one moment of time is always already capable of passing, of actualizing a relation to another moment that is not its contemporary, that being is the interdependency of temporal moments. If we take this as the basis of understanding Emersonian eternalism, we will see that it is unnecessary to make excuses for Emerson’s thinking on time, that he is not a presentist who dismisses the weight of history for the levity of spontaneous intuitions, as John Jay Chapman (252), James Truslow Adams (414-15), and others have suggested, but one for whom eternity is historical and history eternal.

II. Emerson’s Essays: Eternalism and Immanence

One of the most welcome developments in Emerson studies in recent years has been the effort to provide a deeper and more serious account of Emerson’s engagement with major
philosophical sources of transcendental philosophy, much of which critics were, until recently, willing to write off as superficial. This criticism is an outgrowth—albeit in an opposite direction—of the pathbreaking work of Cornel West, Richard Poirier, and Stanley Cavell, whose contributions made it newly possible to take Emerson seriously as a social critic and philosopher. While these earlier writers expanded the scope of Emerson scholarship by showing how he anticipated or informed the philosophical projects of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and, not least, William James and John Dewey (Albrecht 394-95), important recent work by David Greenham, Joseph Urbas, and others has deepened the field’s commitment to understanding the ways in which Emerson himself took philosophy seriously. It has become increasingly clear that he was not, as has too often been assumed, a repeater of idealist platitudes received at second hand through the works of Coleridge, Victor Cousin, and others; on the contrary, Emerson put his reading to work. In the section that follows, I will argue with reference to a range of works, including the essays “History” and “Circles,” and the preface of the inaugural 1840 issue of The Dial, that Emerson conceives of eternity dynamically and in a Spinozan fashion, as the immanent cause of time. Via Emerson, these ideas provide the basis for a modernist approach to time that does not subscribe to Bergson’s criticism of the concept of eternity as necessarily robbing time of dynamism. This approach conceives of eternity as a dynamic, non-totalizing structure that affects, and is affected by, its constituent temporalities; it emphasizes the limited, conditional nature of freedom, while suggesting that the trajectory of time lacks any inherent tendency (such as progress or providence) toward particular ends.

My effort to uncover the Spinozan strain of Emerson’s thinking—and by extension his influence on the modernist generation—owes much to the turn toward seriousness in consideration of Emerson’s philosophical impact, which has helped to depose the longstanding
myth of what West calls Emerson’s “flight from history, his rejection of the past” (619). Though West denies that Emerson really flees from time, he identifies a contradiction in Emerson’s thought between its emphasis on dynamism (becoming, flux, impermanence) and its tendency of “viewing the world sub specie aeternitatis” (627). I argue, on the contrary, that the dynamic and eternalist sides of Emerson’s thought are only coherent (in themselves and as inheritances of Spinoza’s philosophy) if we take them as extensions of one another—in short, that to view the world sub specie aeternitatis is already to think of a living, changing world. There is certainly a presentist rhetoric in much of Emerson’s oeuvre; in “History,” for instance, he writes that “All inquiry into antiquity […] is the desire to do away this wild, savage, and preposterous There or Then, and introduce in its place the Here and the Now” (241). However, Emerson does not devalue history so much as insist that it can do nothing for us unless we have understood how a historical moment continues to operate causally in the present. What appears as presentism is in fact a kind of historicism, exemplified in “History” by an allusion to the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Belzoni, who “digs and measures in the mummy-pits and pyramids of Thebes, until he can see the end of the difference between the monstrous work and himself” (241). Per Emerson, Belzoni’s archaeology discovers the contours of the past’s presence; it identifies not only what part of a given past inheres in the present, but also what part of it does not. The presentist, by contrast, cannot see the past at all—it does not exist except as present. On the other hand, Emerson is ever anxious to condemn the excessive historicism (and traditionalism) by which the present is all past. If Belzoni grasps the “end of the difference” between past and present, he does so only by measuring the difference itself. It matters, in other words, what the past does not furnish for us. Emerson thereby anticipates Van Wyck Brooks’s call in the next century, issued in the pages of a revived version of The Dial, to “[d]iscover, invent a usable past” (339). The
meaning of Emerson’s historicism is to discover this persistent, efficacious past and to found a new present upon it—not in one act, but in a continuous discovery; that is, to perpetually found it, to make of one’s life an ongoing process of founding and re-founding. To that end, a past is usable for Emerson inasmuch as it enables this paradoxical process of beginning anew from old materials: “Broader and deeper we must write our annals,—from an ethical reformation, from an influx of the ever new, ever sanative conscience” (“History” 256, my italics). Ever sensitive to the etymological echoes of his words, Emerson harks back here to the classical Greek meaning of ethos: character, custom, or habit. What we reform in our engagement with history, in other words, is a characteristic way of living; we break a habit that threatens to characterize us too definitively, too finally. But “ethical,” of course, suggests that we are also reforming our characteristic modes of relating to others, our way of weaving a life out of interactions with them. Though there is certainly a rhetoric of progression here, of “ethical reformation” by expanding and deepening our integration with the past, it is not inevitable, guaranteed, or directed toward any single telos. This reformation is less a term for progress, perhaps, than for change.

Emerson’s unsigned preface to the first issue of the original Dial clarifies the distinction between his dynamic eternalism and the alternatives for which it is often mistaken, particularly static eternalism and presentism. In this text, “The Editors to the Reader,” Emerson frames

90 The theme of “founding” is central to Cavell’s work on Emerson, particularly in his classic essay “Finding as Founding.” It also figures prominently in West’s articulation of Emerson vis-à-vis the pragmatist tradition. For West, Emerson “wipes the temporal slate clean not in order to stop or transcend time but in order to be at the beginning of a new time” (627).

91 Benjamin De Casseres, an American writer best known for the poem “Moth-Terror” and for his association with H. L. Mencken, makes a relevant comparison between Emerson and Spinoza on their shared disdain for guilt and penitence, which for both imply a slavish devotion to the past. Shortly after attributing to Emerson the lamentation that “[t]he lives of men are an endless expiation,” De Casseres declares that the thought that “[e]ach day we should be an apostate to a self is the essence of the teaching of Spinoza” (“The Impenitent” 139).
eternity in immanent terms, as something inseparable from the manifestations of time that constitute it. Because Emerson’s eternity is made up only of the mutable relations between manifestations of time, it is not the immutable, transcendent relic of classical philosophy that Bergson normally understands by the term “eternity.” Emerson’s eternity also excludes any notion of presentism. While presentists might allow that things change in time, they give ontological primacy to the present moment—in other words, while there might be such a thing as change, only things experienced in the present are real; for the presentist, eternity is not dynamism, but the view from outside of time, outside of the capturable, essential, living moment. Just as static eternalism ascribes only secondary reality to time, presentism must understand eternity as only an abstraction or derivation from the really living present. What Emerson offers in his preface, though, is a conception of eternity that must remain unintelligible if we equate it with timelessness:

[With diligent hands and good intent we set down our Dial on the earth. We wish it may resemble that instrument in its celebrated happiness, that of measuring no hours but those of sunshine. […] let it be such a Dial, not as the dead face of a clock, hardly even such as the Gnomon in a garden, but rather such a Dial as is the Garden itself, in whose leaves and flowers and fruits the suddenly awakened sleeper is instantly apprised not what part of dead time, but what state of life and growth is now arrived and arriving. (“The Editors to the Reader” 4, my italics)]

Though unsigned, these words are Emerson’s, and they attempt to capture the intellectual ethos of the New England Transcendentalists in broad strokes through the image of the sun-dial (Myerson 137). The passage’s preference for the organic time of “life and growth” over the mechanical time read from “the dead face of a clock” sounds not a little like Bergson; however,
the image of the sun casts a shadow across that similarity. The sun is a perennial figure of
eternity (its circular appearance suggests a symbolic infinity) and of God (it is omnipresent in the
day sky and gives both light and life). The dial is in one sense analogous to the archetypal
symbol of the Romantic artist, the Aeolian harp that sings under the sway of an invisible,
immanent power; however, the dial suggests an element of measurement, of clarification, that the
Aeolian harp lacks. The dial is in fact a better symbol of the relationship between time and the
immanence of eternity. Let us first take the garden: the sun’s light nourishes it, gives it life, and
is the immanent cause of its flourishing; however, this kind of causation between sun and garden
does not follow the arrow of time. The sunlight does not affect the garden at one point in time
and cease to affect it in a following moment (the moment of the effect), but persists, inheres,
within the garden. The garden in this sense expresses the sunlight, its immanent cause.92

The same is true of the dial’s relation to the sunlight, but the dial now represents the
concerted effort to comprehend the connexio of causal relations between the sun and what it
illuminates. The vitality of the garden, in which the sun dwells as an immanent cause, in turn
makes possible the life of the dial maker, whom we must posit in order to posit the dial and
nourishes that life. In “History,” which Emerson first published only a year after the founding of
The Dial, “[a] man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the
world […] He cannot live without a world” (254). Figuratively speaking, the dial maker and the

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92 For the significance of the dynamic of expression to Spinoza, see Deleuze, Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,
18-22. Note also that Emerson’s capitalization of “Garden” in the editors’ address to the reader of course suggests
the Biblical Garden of Eden. The contrast between Emerson’s garden and Eden is akin to the contrast between his
Spinozan eternalism and a more typical theological eternalism. While the eternal and the temporal exist on the same
“plane” of being in Emerson’s garden (the sunlight continues to inhere in the garden as its immanent cause, even as
the garden itself is subject to a life and death that the eternal in itself is not), the Biblical Eden is an eternity granted
by the blessing of a transcendent God. When this blessing is rescinded and the punishment of suffering meted out to
Adam and Eve, the couple are also expelled from the eternal realm of the Garden. Although Eden is a paradise on
earth, it is accessible on the earth only in this mythic, Biblical past. We, as the supposed descendants of the expelled,
are denied any meaningful access to it on this plane.
garden are a connexio woven of the same roots, of which eternity or history is the weaving together of all weavings, the relation of relations. The dial maker then makes possible the analysis of the sun’s effects, the discernment of the network of causes that it produces. As in Spinoza’s philosophy, God or substance (Emerson’s sunlight) functions differently than one would expect of a typical theological eternalism. God is not a transcendent creator or ultimate ground of the real, as in Augustine, but a creator that is, in a sense, expressed through its creations, a cause whose power is coextensive with its effects. We arrive again at what Deleuze characterizes as the source of Spinoza’s heresy: the identity-in-diversity of the cause and its effects. Inasmuch as the sun in Emerson’s imagery is analogous to an immanent cause, we can now imagine the dial as an expression of the sun’s causal power that actualizes that power, makes it visible, comprehensible, as a shadow cast on the dial. The sun is inseparable from the essence of the dial, which measures and expresses the effects of the sun, just as it is inseparable from the essence of the garden, which actualizes the sunlight as vibrancy, vitality, growth. As in Morfino’s reading of the connexio in Spinoza, the eternal is inseparable from its expression in time, and though it is irreducible to any one expression (the garden as such is not eternal, nor is the dial), it has no life outside of that to which it relates; its relations, in which it produces effects, are the measure of an existence that cannot be given as a pure, abstract being-in-itself.93 Though these causal convolutions perhaps read as fanciful, or separable from Emerson’s sense of time, it is worth noting that in “History,” Emerson declares that “[t]he identity of history is equally intrinsic, the diversity equally obvious. There is at the surface infinite variety of things;

93 We could imagine, though, that the sun possesses this kind of isolated being insofar as it does not depend, outside of the literary scenario of Emerson’s text, on anything earthly. This would be true, but the sun would still be in relation to something—its presence would still be measurable somehow. The Spinozist perspective conceives of being as an activity, a being-in-relation; so, inasmuch as the sun’s existence entails that it casts light, generates energy, produces magnetism, and so on, insofar as it produces effects that must be registered in some entity that is relatively distinct from the sun, it can have no isolable being-in-itself.
at the centre there is simplicity of cause” (242). I earlier emphasized that Spinoza’s eternity is neither one nor many, but positively infinite; here, Emerson likewise resists a neat reduction of history to either pure multiplicity or simplicity—the variety of appearance is a necessary expression of the simplicity of cause; that is, the cause really is various, insofar as it lives through its effects, but insofar as its effects live through it, it is simple, a *sine qua non*, a transcendental (but not a transcendent) condition. The simplicity of this condition is not that it grants being “all at once,” from without, but that it cannot help accompanying the diversity of expression. Put another way, the multiplicity of the modes will fall into a structure regardless; the immanent cause, as a transcendental condition, names only the inescapability of this provisional structuration.

We are in a better position to evaluate the meaning of Emerson’s progressivism—and by extension its role in his thinking about time and eternity—now that we have explored the Spinozan resonances of Emerson’s eternalism. It is necessary to return now to the question of Emerson’s longstanding reputation as advancing a variety of progressivism, since I have claimed that he is a conduit for a non-progressive understanding of eternalism that is irreducible to static conceptions of eternity. To be sure, Emerson’s reputation as a progressive is mostly well-deserved, considering the proclamation that we read in the “American Scholar” address that genius, “[i]n its essence, is progressive […] genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates” (57-59). The same could be said of the sentiments expressed in “Compensation”: “[Man’s] life is a progress, and not a station. His instinct is trust” (301). Peter Zogas has recently argued for a more serious accounting of Emerson’s progressivism, claiming that in “History” and elsewhere he absorbs the premises of universal history as he encountered them in translations of works by Cousin, Benjamin Constant,
and Theodore Jouffroy—namely, its faith in an *a priori* law of historical progress and perfection—but strives to rescue some notion of the individual’s power to intervene in a process that otherwise renders individual actions irrelevant, taking the advance toward reason, enlightenment, and the absolute as inevitable (218-226). Emerson’s innovation, Zogas suggests, is to predicate historical progress on “the individual’s moment of negative engagement, one that returns the individual to an active role in the development of progress through its oppositional stance” (227). In other words, the engine of progress is the individual’s dissatisfaction with what progress has wrought, and this refusal to affirm is itself an affirmation of an alternative. The value of Zogas’s account is that it refuses to explain Emerson’s progressivism away—by insisting merely on explaining it, on explicating its specific mechanism, Zogas instead shows that Emerson’s notion of progress is non-teleological (it posits no final state of absolute knowing; rather, as in “Circles,” there is “no outside, no inclosing wall, co circumference to us”) nor easily won; any and all progression, he suggests, emerge from conflict or discontent, yet there is no final figure toward which it progresses (Emerson 405; Zogas 227).94 To put it in more Spinozan terms, we attain new capacities to act only by altering the relation between the various causes of which the present is an effect.

Zogas’s account of Emersonian progress allows us to see that, while Emerson remains a progressive in an attenuated or anomalous sense, this progressivism does not necessarily conflict

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94 Though this mode of negation more immediately suggests the Hegelian dialectic than Spinozism, it is worth noting that Hegel developed his “negation of the negation,” the moment of dialectical sublation, from Spinoza’s proposition, in the June 2nd, 1674 letter to Jelles, that “determination is negation” (892). Though the differences between Hegelian and Spinozian negation are outside of the scope of this project, Macherey’s lengthy commentary on the issue in *Hegel or Spinoza* remains authoritative. See especially pages 208-213. In short, Macherey observes that Hegel’s negation is essentially teleological, in that all contradictions will ultimately become integrated into a hierarchical and speculative absolute, whereas Spinoza’s negation poses only an open-ended struggle between things striving to assert themselves. For Spinoza there is no “negation of the negation,” no necessary and progressive absorption of contraries into an expanding, complexifying totality (212).
with the dynamic, non-teleological conception of eternity that Emerson conveys to the modernists. Moreover, because Emersonian progressivism is anomalous, informed less by a strong belief in the inevitable passage of history toward a *telos* than by a logic of immanent relations in which every interaction with time is an interaction with eternity, it could be picked up, albeit with various degrees of ambivalence, by such modernists as Wilder and Williams, who could foreground its conflictual understanding of the reciprocity between time and eternity while resisting its more explicitly progressive strains. It is in the context of revising the idea of progress that Emerson devises a conflictual dynamic in relation to time—a sense that not everything is possible at once, that some causal factors, some temporalities, must be de-activated in order to activate others.\(^95\) Perpetual progress requires us to be capable of rejecting the present moment, of reassembling it and composing a new present, made up of a new configuration of moments, in its place. This picture of progress excludes presentism, since it requires that the present be in contact with non-present temporalities that are not only real, but constitutive of whatever that present contains. Inasmuch as this picture of progress involves the determination of the structure of time by a conflictual tension between heterogeneous modes or manifestations of time, it also cannot be reconciled with static eternalism, for which eternity must remain immutable and immune from any determination by or in time. Finally, Emersonian progress also excludes any ordinary sense of progress as equivalent to teleology; if Emerson’s progress is perpetual, it is necessarily unlimited and lacking direction toward any particular end, which in itself would negate this perpetual quality by implying limitation and finitude. As Emerson attests in “History,” “Nature is an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws. She hums the

\(^{95}\) The conflictual dimension of Emerson’s thought is especially pronounced in later works like “Fate,” where he declares that “Man is not order of nature, sack and sack, belly and members, link in a chain, nor any ignominious baggage, but a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the Universe” (953).
old well-known air through innumerable variations” (243). The interplay without contradiction of singularity and multiplicity, repetition and “innumerable” difference, is inseparable from Spinoza’s philosophical legacy, with its assertion of the essential, but not numerical, identity of cause and effect. Inasmuch as this tendency is reflected in Emerson's sense of Nature as a unity that engenders its own differentiation, Moncure D. Conway, an admirer and acolyte of Emerson's, associates his mentor's thought, in his own autobiography, with Darwinian evolution, going so far as to claim that "we who studied [Emerson] were building our faith on evolution before Darwin came to prove our foundations strictly scientific" (249).96 The tendency to think identity and difference as non-contradictory also manifests itself in the work of Nietzsche, another Emerson admirer, where it appears as the “untimely” attitude toward history, or what we might characterize as the historical function of ahistoricity—eternity can be reconstituted, can change, but only if the relations between its effects do so, and therefore only if a given history can be denied, and another affirmed in its place (“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” 61). The allegedly evolutionary element that Conway finds in Emerson's thinking is progressive, but not teleological—it directs progress toward no particular end. When developed in the direction suggested by Nietzsche's thought, the logic of immanence shows itself to be neither progressive nor teleological. The logic of immanent relations is interpretable in a progressive sense (as Conway suggests) but is ambiguous enough that it need not be interpreted so (as the example of Nietzsche suggests). It is because of this ambiguity that Williams, for instance, can receive the Emersonian tradition and deny much of its overt progressivism, while

96 However, one should heed Guthrie's qualification that "Conway's attribution to Emerson of some sort of foreknowledge about evolution should probably be ascribed to hero worship" (33). See pages 31-34 for Guthrie's discussion of Emerson and Conway. For my purposes, the accuracy of Conway's claims for Emerson’s anticipation of Darwin are less important than the fact that he saw fit to draw a connection between these two figures and Spinoza.
adopting (even if without acknowledgment) its conflictual conception of the dynamic relationship between time and eternity.

While recognizing the Spinozan strain in Emerson’s thought does not allow us to discover, miraculously, a non-progressive Emerson, it welds onto that conception of progress a logic of immanent relations that complicates the most explicit progressive content of Emersonianism and constitutes the very dynamism of his eternity, insofar as the eternal is immanence itself, the emergent structure of reciprocal interactions between various temporalities. Recall that Deleuze identified the core of Spinoza’s immanentism, the great heresy of his system, with his conflation of cause and effect, God and creature. This is, in fact, one of Emerson’s central premises in “Circles”: “Omnipresence is a higher fact […] Cause and effect are two sides of one fact” (410). The implication of this logic for thinking about time is that eternity, which is nothing other than the structural (immanent) cause of time, is affected by any change in relation between the temporalities that express it. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson suggests that our flourishing depends on enacting what James R. Guthrie has called "temporal reform," or a reconsideration of our relation to time (1); Emerson contrasts the present-oriented temporal experience of the roses beneath his window with that of "man," who "postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and

97 The echoes of Spinoza’s immanentism in Emerson’s writings are frequent. Another conspicuous case occurs near the end of “Fate”: “How idle to choose a random sparkle here or there, when the indwelling necessity plants the rose of beauty on the brow of chaos, and discloses the central intention of Nature to be harmony and joy” (967, my italics). “Indwelling” is a loaded term; in 1839, George Ripley defended Emerson against Andrews Norton’s charge that he was a Spinozist, and therefore an atheist. In a lengthy reply to Norton, Ripley rebuts Norton by setting out to prove that Spinoza (and thus also Emerson) do not deny the existence of God. In the process, Ripley quotes Spinoza in translation, presumably his own: “God is the permanent and indwelling cause [causa immanens] of all things” (122). Thus, Emerson’s “indwelling necessity” would have carried a specific and important resonance for those who were aware of the basic propositions of Spinoza’s philosophy.
strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time” (270). Guthrie argues that,"[u]nlike man, the rose does not exist in time […] By living always in the present, the rose exists anterior to time" (2). 98 Though this reading is for the most part unobjectionable, Guthrie’s rendering of "above time" as anteriority or existence out-of-time implies a sharp separation between time and eternity that I resist. If cause and effect are inseparable, as the immanentist Emerson of "Circles" declares, "above time" must mean something other than anteriority. The cause (eternity) and the effect (time) cannot be cleft apart, but rather express one another.

I contend that Emerson’s “above time” does not describing the ideal relation to time as transcendence, or as a static, Augustinian eternity, as Guthrie implies, but as recognizing and affirming its participation in a dynamic eternity where the primary reality is the "higher fact" of "Omnipresence": all of time that ever was or will be acts on this present to produce it as it is; one does not escape out of time into the eternal, but identifies the eternal with the vast structure of temporal inter-action and mutual determination. The contrast between these two positions emerges more clearly if we read Emerson's "above time" as an allusion to, and silent revision of, Augustine's theological eternalism. The phrase suggests a passage from Book XI of Augustine’s *Confessions*: “these words are far beneath me, nay, they are not at all, because they flee and pass away; but the Word of God is far above me, and abides for ever” (223). “Abides for ever” is innocuous and conceptually vague in English translation; in Augustine’s Latin, though, the reference to eternity is unmistakable ("manet in aeternum")—the abiding is not simply perpetual ("for ever"), but eternal, belonging to a category that is not, itself, temporal (222). 99 Augustine asserts that God’s eternal Word stands above time and is the very source of the real; earthly

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98 See Guthrie's *Above Time: Emerson's and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions*, 97-104, for a more extended discussion of "Self-Reliance."
99 See the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Confessions*, pp. 48, for Augustine’s Latin.
words, by comparison, belong in time, and are thus beneath God. In Emerson, though, human beings can live—and should aspire to live—in this position above time, in the eternal. Where Augustine insists on a sharp demarcation between creator and creation, eternity and time, cause and effect, Emerson implies no such division; on the contrary, the latter terms participate directly in the former. Not coincidentally, Emerson’s conflation of God and creature in the “Divinity School Address” of 1838 was a factor prompting the Unitarian divine Andrews Norton to attack him, under the thinnest of veils, as a Spinozist, a pantheist, and, by extension, a heretic. Thomas M. Allen also understands Emerson's “above time” not as timelessness (as in Augustinian eternity), but something more peculiar, noting that “[t]he spatial metaphor ‘above time’ must represent a state of being in relation to time that is ‘in the present.’ If this state is ‘in’ present time, then the preposition ‘above’ cannot describe a position outside of time,” but rather “a position of power in relation to time” (202-03). In the terms that I have been using, this position must be one from which it is possible to produce a kind of freedom within the determinate structure of time.

In the Spinozan reading of Emerson that I have been developing, one attains a position of power over time by a necessarily experimental process of devising adequate understandings of causal relations, of exploring the consequences of encounters with other bodies, past, present and future; hence, Emerson later writes that “Fate is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; —for causes which are unpenetrated,” and that to understand how these causes

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100 “Self-Reliance” was not the only time that Emerson developed his eternalism in relation to Augustine’s. The famed premise of “Circles,” for instance (“Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn”), is initially framed as a meditation on Augustine’s description of God as “a circle whose centre [is] everywhere, and its circumference nowhere” (Emerson 403).

101 I address the significance of Norton’s accusation of Spinozism briefly in my introduction.

102 The identity of freedom and power is a central aspect of Spinoza’s conception of ethics and his theory of knowledge. Spinoza regards the power to conceive adequately of the causes of things (their necessary conditions) as a source of joy, that is, in his technical usage, an expansion of the power to act. Much of the Ethics consists of an elaboration of the continuity between the powers of knowing, feeling, and acting. See especially Ethics, part III.
determine us is to convert them into a productive, vital, “wholesome force” (“Fate” 918). This force is expended in a nature that is “intricate, overlapped, interweaved, and endless”—in short, we operate and are operations of this causal power in the midst of a vast connexio of necessities, or relations that are determined to produce certain effects (918). The activity of the absolute, primary causal force, of God, is its existence and generation of determined, limited, individual instances; likewise, the activity of the eternal is its existence in time. "Fate" is perhaps Emerson's most direct effort to reconcile a range of supposedly contradictory terms, "freedom" and "necessity" being the most obvious. As Greenham has recently argued, the paradox-resolving impetus of the essay shows the direct influence of the German Idealist F. W. Schelling.103 Schelling's "Philosophical Inquiries" attempts to reconcile the contraries of freedom and necessity, discrete individuality and absolute unity, among others, through a robust, if ultimately ambivalent, defense of Spinoza against the charge of universalizing, difference-suppressing pantheism (Schelling 11-17).104 Greenham suggests that Emerson had access to Schelling through James Elliot Cabot's 1844 translation of the "Philosophical Inquiries"; this being the case, Emerson would have also encountered Schelling's description of his Naturphilosophie as an idealist revision and correction of Spinoza's (reputedly) mechanistic philosophy (Schelling 23-24). Schelling, like Hegel and Bergson, emphasizes that his own philosophy is a correction of Spinoza's deterministic and mechanistic views of nature; however, much recent Spinoza scholarship has vindicated Spinoza of these charges and suggests that Schelling's alternative of a creative immanence that innovates within itself is closer to Spinoza's conception of substance

103 See Greenham’s "The Significance of F. W. J. Schelling's 'Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom' in the Development of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Concept of Fate."

104 These and other accusations were typical of those levelled at Spinoza and his reputed followers during the Pantheismusstreit, the controversy that erupted around the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy in Germany after the death of Gottfried Ephraim Lessing in 1780. After Kant's formulation of transcendental idealism, this event is perhaps the single most influential in the development of the German Idealism that permeates so much of American Transcendentalist thought. See Frederick C. Beiser, The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte, 2.
than he imagines. All of this is to say that Emerson could not have helped but absorb aspects of Spinoza's eternalism in the process of absorbing Schelling's philosophy. If we transfer these dynamic, self-innovating metaphysics of Schelling's (and, arguably, Spinoza's) to Emerson's conception of time, we can see that he provides the resources for thinking of freedom as a relation to eternity, which is only to say that freedom relates to, and allows us a modicum of power over, the structure of time. Freedom arises from the examination of what temporalities can possibly exist together under given condition. To become free in time is to understand how time is woven and how it weaves us; it is a freedom that comes from discovering the limits of action. In the Spinozan and, I argue, Emersonian modes of thinking, this examination of how we are conditioned by time amounts to an ethical activity, inasmuch as it is necessarily also an experimentation in what modes of sociality give us the most power over our constitution in time. It is this ethico-temporal content that informs Wilder's search for a non-totalizing mode of community in Our Town and, in a more vexed fashion, Williams’s analysis of the limits of the isolated individual’s—and the artist’s—power over the structure of history in much of In the American Grain.

As I proceed to examine the modernist encounter with this Spinozan strain of eternalism, I will bear in mind an appropriately Spinozan question: to what determinate powers of action does it connect us? In other words, what effects become possible from this encounter between Spinoza, Emerson, and the modernists? How does the conception of eternity as a conflictual assemblage of temporalities enable Williams and Wilder to reimagine American history, or the constitution of social and political communities? Before these questions can be addressed, it is

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105 Studies that suggest a more dynamic Spinoza than Schelling assumes include Hallett's Aeternitas: A Spinozistic Study (1930), Pierre Macherey's Hegel or Spinoza (1979), and Yitzhak Melamed's Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought (2013).
necessary to note that Emerson’s thinking about time is diffractive. There is no Emersonian time-philosophy as such, but a number of distinct tendencies. I have foregrounded his dynamic eternalism here not only because I believe it to be especially prominent in his thinking, but because I believe it allows us—and allowed Wilder, allowed Williams, to a greater or lesser degree—to circumvent some of the worst consequences of the alternative ways of conceiving of time in the Emersonian tradition. Emerson’s eternalism has often been cited as the greatest impediment toward making any meaningful use of his thinking as a mode of political criticism. Indeed, if we begin by presuming that his eternalism is static, that it considers what is real and essential to be unchanging and transcendent, we can conclude nothing better than that Emersonianism dooms us to quietism and complacency. The picture is arguably worse if we foreground Emerson’s progressive rhetoric and understand him as one who sees the trajectory of history moving inevitably in one direction or another. Peter Nicoloff, Peter S. Field, and West, for instance, have all commented on the ways that Emerson’s conceptions of the individual and of democracy were based “at least in part on the special characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Field 25). West has written similarly of Emerson’s “liberal” racism and its message that “the worth of human personality is grand, the will of great individuals is mighty, and the cycle of fate (symbolized by ascending and descending races) is almighty—yet it presently tilts toward the West” (641-42). The dominant note in these accounts of Emerson’s sense of racial providence is that of progress. The progressive streak in Emerson provides a convenient vehicle for a worldview that is essentially racist, even if not aggressively so. A presentist Emerson would be no better since this would amount only to removing the sense of historical trajectory from this providence. However, if we read essays like “Fate” and “History” with a mind to drawing out what is anomalous in them, as Zogas does in his account of Emersonian progressivism, and with
a sense of their Spinozan debts, we can recover an eternalist position that does not damn the world of time, but demands it, that avoids the worst pitfalls of progressivism and presentism, and that provides a basis for modernist aesthetic practices that have thus far gone unexamined. This eternalism, in affirming the inheritance of every past in the present, would prevent us from waving off prejudices like Emerson’s as problems of their time, troubles of a receded past to which we no longer owe our vigilance. Emerson’s eternalism, properly elaborated, must make possible a critique of Emerson’s racism. If the things of the past do not die but offer themselves up as an immanent resource to our present lives, we must see that this also means that we are not inoculated to what is pernicious in the past; on the contrary, the effects of these pasts live in this present. I return to this problem of the inheritance of the pernicious past in my discussion of Williams’s *In the American Grain*; for now, though, I do not claim that reading Emerson as a dynamic eternalist could redeem him of his prejudices, only that Emerson’s intellectual legacy yields a markedly different set of resources to the modernists—and perhaps to us—if we understand the Spinozan conception of dynamic eternity as an integral part of this legacy.¹⁰⁶

III. “Just Chalk…Or Fire”: The Temporalities of *Our Town*

The first case of modernist dynamic eternalism that I will examine is that of Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), which develops an account of eternity as the immanent cause or structure of time. This immanent structure is neither in time nor outside it but exists only as the necessary co-articulation of these different modes of temporal experience. The play offers a sense of time that is both plural and singular, inasmuch as there exist any number of ways of being in time that are irreducible to one another, yet all express a single reality that is neither progressive (it does not

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¹⁰⁶ Whether the modernists accepted this legacy willingly and wittingly, of course, is another matter. I address Wilder’s and Williams’s ambivalent relationship to Emersonianism in their respective sections.
advance toward any particular telos) nor presentist (it does not elevate the present to transcendent or preeminent status over other temporalities). The eternity of Our Town is a totality that does not totalize, a unity whose parts do not lose themselves before the whole. What makes Wilder’s play particularly noteworthy, though, is that it uses this non-totalizing totality as the model for a community that is similarly dynamic and non-totalizing. In portraying the fictional town of Grover’s Corners (a fictionalized version of Peterborough, New Hampshire) as a place of dynamism, riven by plural temporalities that are nevertheless bound to one another in relations of interdependence, Wilder challenges the modernist trope of the city as a uniquely dynamic locale, in contrast to the small town, where time is either suspended in Arcadian fixity or bound to eternally recurrent cycles. Georg Simmel provides a brief, but characteristic, version of this trope in his influential 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli […] [in contrast] with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence, which depends more on emotional and felt relationships than on “intellectualistic” ones. (325)

Although Simmel does not refer to the temporal dimension of urban experience, his conspicuous reference to the slow, cyclical rhythms of rural life suggests that urban life, by contrast, is more rapid, fluctuating, and unpredictable—in short, that it is more dynamic. The equation of urbanity with dynamism, flux, and change also characterizes a broad swathe of canonical modernist texts: Baudelaire’s oft-cited discussion of flânerie in “The Painter of Modern Life” depends on it, as do the streaming consciousnesses, with their fluctuating, subjective senses of time, that James Joyce and Virginia Woolf construct in Ulysses and Mrs. Dalloway, respectively. Our Town joined a
number of earlier works in attempting to place a rural claim on the dynamism and complexity that was often figured as uniquely urban, including Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*, and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. I argue, though, that Wilder’s play is distinct in its explicit and equal concern for both eternity and the fluctuating, plural, or heterogeneous nature of time. In thinking through its conception of community, *Our Town* refuses to give away either term and instead understands them as constitutive of one another.

On this basis of dynamic eternalism, Wilder imagines community as a process of creating interdependences between heterogeneous time-worlds or temporalities. Before proceeding, though, I hope to clarify what I mean by these terms. While they often overlap with what might be described as tense (as a variation of past, present, or future), I mean something more specific and granular. In an important essay, M. M. Bakhtin describes a literary-artistic concept that he calls the chronotope, or “time space.” A chronotope is a formal category or type of time as it appears in a literary work; through the chronotope, “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84-85). Although I mean something quite similar by “temporality,” particularly in the sense that both chronotopes and temporalities refer to the way that time is experienced, rather than to any way of measuring time, I want to preserve a conceptual and lexical distinction between my terms and Bakhtin’s chronotopes. Temporalities depend on a specific conception of eternity as a dynamic and immanent cause of time, whereas chronotopes are fundamentally effects of language and do not necessarily entail a specific metaphysics. I use the term “temporality” to retain this Spinozan echo and to avoid conflating Bakhtin’s pluralist, metaphysically indeterminate sense of the chronotope with the monistic and Spinozan account of
time that I find in Wilder’s play. Like chronotopes, temporalities are not simple markers of when something happens, but also of how. Temporalities are qualitatively singular ways that a being can function in time (which is to say, in relation to other beings, or to being itself). In this sense, though, they are also analogous to Spinoza’s modes, the qualitatively determinate, specified expressions of substance (or God, or Nature). I use the term time-world when the temporality in question tends to entail a particularly comprehensive sense of the world or world-view (the time-world of capitalist progress, for instance), though I do not recognize a difference in kind between the two concepts.

The community that arises from this sense of temporality is nothing more than the social structure that produces itself as the expression of the immanent causal relation of interdependence between eternity and the multiplicity of times that constitute eternity in their co-articulation. It is an ongoing activity, a weaving-together, rather than a being-together; it is what Morfino indicates when he observes that a social formation is “an interweaving of different times, requiring reflection on the displacement and torsion created by the articulation of the different levels of the structure” (163, italics in the original). Wilder attempts this very reflection on the structure of temporal interweaving through the meta-theatricality of Our Town, its persistent commentary on its own structure via the character of the Stage Manager, who frequently breaks the fourth wall to examine the town from temporal perspectives that do not arise “naturally” in the interactions between other characters. Though the Stage Manager in some ways resembles the artist-historian figure of Emerson and Williams (the latter of which I will

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107 Wilder often uses incidental music to suggest this motif of a community woven in eternity. The most conspicuous example is his use of the Protestant hymn “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” which appears during the church choir’s practice in Act One (37), at Emily and George’s wedding in Act Two (73), and at Emily’s funeral in Act Three (86). The final verse of the hymn predicts a world in which “perfect love and friendship reign / Through all eternity” (Wilder 101). Though this eternity is explicitly theological in a way that Wilder’s, I argue, is not, its recurrence throughout the play suggests the deep importance of this concept of an eternal community in the town’s imaginary.
address in the next section), he does not produce or master the community whose temporalities he examines, but merely allows us insight about the way its heterogeneous temporalities depend on, presume, and modify one another; it also allows us to juxtapose lived, subjective modes of time with temporalities of larger, more impersonal scale. He is not eternity’s privileged expositor, but a participant in it, interacting with the other characters and referring to Grover’s Corners at various points as “our town” (14, my italics).108 Wilder’s meta-theatrical devices allow us to see, furthermore, that the subject of eternity in Our Town is not the individual, the narrator, or the heroic figure standing outside the weave of time, but the community, which is itself only a dense fabric of interdependency that includes human and non-human, voluntary and involuntary, subjective and objective components.

Before turning to Wilder’s text to analyze his exploration of a dynamic eternalist mode of community, it is worth examining the conditions of Wilder’s interest in eternity as a concept, particularly since he is more amenable to it than most of his contemporaries. The prominent role of religion in Wilder’s upbringing meant that he was exposed from a young age to the concept of eternity. Eternity appeared, for him, as an idea that was a rhetorically and conceptually vital part of his world. It is for this reason that Wilder, more so than many of his contemporaries, was invested in preserving some notion of eternity, even if it meant recasting eternity in fundamentally different terms by casting off stasis and the transcendent promise of a beyond of time in favour of a dynamic notion of eternity as an activity located wholly within the temporal world. Wilder’s family was not only quite self-conscious of its Puritan ancestry but continued to uphold a certain tradition of devotion and piety (Konkle 12-14). Wilder grew up surrounded by those who took their religion, and thus its conception of eternity, seriously. His maternal

108 All page numbers refer to the Samuel French acting edition of Our Town.
grandfather had been a longtime Presbyterian pastor, while his father served for seven years, most of them during Wilder’s childhood, as a Congregationalist deacon; lastly, Wilder’s brother Amos Niven Wilder became a Congregationalist minister in 1926, later becoming a well-known theologian and professor at Harvard Divinity School (Niven 5-13, 250). Though Wilder himself lacked the intense piety and “religious self-examination” of his stern father, and though he was the most skeptically inclined of his immediate family, he was not overtly rebellious against the faith traditions he inherited (Konkle 12-13). Wilder’s early sense of community, the basis on which he conceived of his relations and obligations to his family, was in fact shaped by these religious traditions and, by extension, by the static, theological conception of eternity that they entailed: the religious community in which Wilder grew up understood eternity as the ground of community altogether and as the guarantor that final communion with God, an ultimate transcendence of the limitations of earthly life, was possible.

And yet, in Our Town, Wilder’s eternity echoes the dynamic conceptions of Emerson and Spinoza, in which eternity becomes the structure of what is possible, constituted and held together in the striving for persistence of an array of heterogeneous temporalities. Given the Wilder family’s upbringing, Emerson would be a natural conduit for a dynamic and broadly Spinozan sense of eternity. In his childhood, Wilder’s father had the family gather every Sunday to read from the Bible and other books in the family library, including works by Henry David Thoreau, while Emerson and the Transcendentalists would have been familiar to Wilder from his own personal reading (Niven 13; Konkle 30). However, this potential route of influence is a

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109 Insofar as I do not find a theological basis in the eternalism of Our Town, my reading of his temporal attitudes differs from that of Lincoln Konkle, whose Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition (2006) is perhaps the most extensive and authoritative treatments of the subject. Konkle argues that Wilder’s sense of time and history derives in large measure from the Puritan tradition of typological reading, and that time, for Wilder, is equal parts cyclical and progressive. See especially Konkle’s fourth chapter, “Dramatic Jeremiads: Wilder’s Revival of the Puritan Rhetoric of Crisis,” which contains a discussion of Our Town.
troubled one. Wilder evidently disdained Emerson’s writing, as he attests later in his career, in a letter to Malcolm Cowley from March of 1952:

Isn’t [Emerson] awful? Yet how that colossus bestrode the world for so long! his ideas basely, soothingly, flattering all that is facile and evasive in the young republic. Wonderful field for the Marxian kind of literary criticism. The very syntax breathes 3 meals a day with hardworking maids in the kitchen preparing them while the Seer entertains these messages and promptings from the Over-Soul. (Wilder 502)

These objections are revealing, not only of the particular version of Emerson that Wilder has in mind, but of the particular shortcomings to which Wilder’s dynamic eternalism might have been sensitive. The letter’s main charge is familiar to readers of Emerson critics such as Santayana and James Truslow Adams—namely, that his optimism is a cloak for complacency and his idealism a justification for political inaction. In other words, whatever the rhetorical trappings of Emersonianism, its effect is narcotic rather than dynamic. Wilder’s reference to this philosophy’s vulnerability to Marxist critique also suggests that he has thought about the social consequences of this hierarchical, complacent version of Transcendentalism, which Wilder’s work strives to avoid: the “Seer” gets to entertain the rhetoric of self-reliance and the individual’s mystical communion with the Ideal only by ignoring relations of real, material dependence on others. The full-stomached seer, contemplating his privileged connection to the spirit world, can recognize no real community with, and no sense of reciprocal dependence on, the maids whose labour keeps him full. Wilder does not see the Over-Soul as an immanent power, but a transcendent one, accessible to the comfortable and secure Emerson but seemingly with no relation at all to the labouring maids, who might as well inhabit another world. Whether one accepts this as an accurate rendering of Emerson’s thinking is secondary to what it tells us about Wilder’s own
ethos: namely, that a conception of immanent power accessible only by those in positions of transcendence or material privilege, such as the Colossus-like Emerson, is no immanence at all and can be no source of community for those who do not occupy such positions.\textsuperscript{110} This stance allows us to understand some of the interests at work in Wilder’s earlier conception of eternity in \textit{Our Town}.\textsuperscript{111} Because Emerson re-inscribes transcendence as a characteristic of the Over-Soul (or eternity, of which it is a figure), the structure of relations cannot be the immanent inter-relation of all things, as the word of his philosophy often promises, but only a hierarchy of transcendences in which the Over-Soul is transcendent to Emerson, who is himself transcendent to his maids. There is no relation of community, but only that of master to servant. Also striking in this vision of the household is the juxtaposition of temporal experience between the placid leisure of Emerson’s eternity and the hectic, routinized labour of his maids. Here, the eternal maintains itself as such only through the subordination of lived temporal rhythms. As my discussion of the subjugating power of capitalist time in \textit{Our Town} will show, Wilder’s interest in the dependence of false eternities on the subordination of alternative temporalities was an abiding one.

But if Wilder so unambiguously rejects what he sees as the exploitative complacency of Emerson’s thought, how is it possible to argue that the dynamic eternalism he produces in \textit{Our Town} turns out to be closely related to Emerson’s? Though it is perhaps the case that Wilder

\textsuperscript{110} As I will argue in the following section, one of the stubborn problems that Williams encounters while articulating the dynamic historicism of \textit{In the American Grain} is precisely this one of decreeing immanence from a position of transcendence. Williams’s artist-historian occupies a similarly world-befridding position as Wilder’s Emerson does.\textsuperscript{111} One possible objection to my reading backward from the letter to Cowley into \textit{Our Town} is that Wilder’s views toward Emerson may have changed in the fourteen years or so that passed between the play and the letter. Nevertheless, I have not found any indication that Wilder’s appreciation of Emerson was different earlier in life, and the characterization of Emerson as an era-defining but obsolete thinker was already well-attested by the 1910s, by Santayana and others. In short, the view would have been current and prevalent enough for Wilder to have encountered it before writing \textit{Our Town}. 
unwittingly affirms a dynamic eternalism whose precepts were always available to him through Emerson, but which he could not himself “read,” this account is unsatisfying, and assumes that Wilder must have inherited his Spinozan conception of eternity from Emerson. In fact, as is evident from the quotations from and allusions to Spinoza in several of Wilder’s works, Wilder had first-hand knowledge of Spinoza’s works. If Wilder saw in Emerson a dead-end, an immanence that unwillingly devolves into transcendence (and, by extension, an eternity that fails to live wholly in the world and instead removes itself again into the ethereal beyond, where it resides in most Christian theological traditions), we might even read Wilder’s conspicuous appeals to Spinoza as attempts to develop a form of eternalism whose dynamism would explicitly contrast with the static eternalism that Wilder mistakenly attributed to Emerson.  

Spinoza appears in the final act of Wilder’s 1942 comedy The Skin of Our Teeth, where he appears in a play-within-the-play, along with Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible, as representatives of the canon of Western thought. Each character speaks a quotation from their works; the character playing Spinoza reads a passage from the philosopher’s unfinished early work, the Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione: “I saw that all objects of my desire and fear were in themselves nothing good nor bad insofar as the mind was affected by them” (Wilder 97). The passage is significant inasmuch as it articulates some of the basic principles of Spinoza’s eternalism: sub specie aeternitatis, objects have no essential being outside of the relations that constitute them and through which they are causes of effects. The Skin of Our Teeth, though, is not an eternalist play in the sense that Our Town is—its approach to time is explicitly cyclical; however, if we cast a

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112 Anne Fletcher provides an intriguing alternative genealogy of Wilder’s views on time that emphasizes his links to Buddhist philosophy. Fletcher’s brief inventory of the categories of time in Wilder’s drama—linear, simultaneous, suspended, interrupted or truncated, perpetual or eternal—is similar to the one that I develop below, though we arrive at very different conclusions. See Fletcher, “No Time Like the Present: Wilder’s Plays and Buddhist Thought and Time,” especially pp. 174-82.
brief glance back at Wilder’s main achievement before *Our Town*, the 1927 novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, we find a more explicit allusion to Spinoza in the context of eternity. In the novel’s final chapter, Wilder describes how a Franciscan monk, Brother Juniper, scores the goodness, piety, and usefulness of victims and survivors of a plague in the Peruvian village of Puerto on a chart, which he claims represents “the statistics of their value *sub specie aeternitatis*” (184). Brother Juniper believes that this tabulation amounts to placing theology “among the exact sciences,” and that it will allow him to understand the *telos* of God’s actions with scientific certainty. Someone with Wilder’s breadth of reading would almost certainly have recognized that the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* was a Spinozist motto signifying a view of God or nature as an immanent cause.\(^{113}\) Though the novel never addresses Spinoza by name, the character of Brother Juniper could be read as an ironic stand-in, a kind of anti-Spinoza whose theological understanding of eternity hinges on precisely the kind of teleology and stasis that Spinoza rejects. While Brother Juniper understands all events in time as belonging to a timeless plan that God will ultimately reveal, Spinoza, as I have argued, sees eternity less as a goal or end-point than a present fact, another name for the ongoing, world-structuring activity of immanent causation.\(^{114}\) Lastly, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* gestures, albeit sketchily, toward a mode of community that would emerge from the examination of relations of interdependence among the characters who fall to their deaths when the eponymous bridge collapses. This examination, Wilder suggests, is a mode of love, which he understands as something akin to Spinoza’s *amor*

\(^{113}\) Wilder could also have attained this sense of Spinoza’s association with the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* from his brother, who had studied theology at Yale. The divinity schools of New England were an important, and especially complicated, source of Spinozan ideas from the 19th century onward. Spinoza was a formative influence on the development of the so-called “Higher Criticism” (or historical analysis) of the Bible in Germany by figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Feuerbach, and David Strauss.

\(^{114}\) Further accentuating the irony are the circumstances of Brother Juniper’s death. Spinoza was famously subject to *cherem* (or expulsion) by the Jewish community in Amsterdam. Brother Juniper, for his troubles, is burned at the stake—not for defying his received faith, as Spinoza allegedly did, but for trying to prove its principles.
intellectualis dei (the intellectual love of God), the affect produced by the examination of the mutual interdependence and interpenetration of all events. In the famous closing words of the novel, the bridge itself becomes the symbol of this mode of interconnection: “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning” (192). The rudiments of a sense of the relationship between community and eternity are present here, but it is not until Our Town that eternity emerges in fully its Spinozan sense as a structure of time, and not a beyond.

In order to discover the dynamic eternalism that structures time in Wilder’s play, I will pay special attention to Act One, which introduces us to the daily life of Grover’s Corners and particularly to the relationship between the Gibbs and Webb families. This quotidian portrait depends on a kind of temporal mosaic effect: the act moves through at least a dozen, perhaps more, relatively distinct modes of temporal experience, none of which, in themselves, gives us a full sense of the play’s temporalities and time-worlds. The co-articulation and interdependence of this mosaic of different modes of time (that is, the modes’ reciprocal determination) provides us with an adequate sense of Grover’s Corners as a living place. Furthermore, understanding how this mosaic effect works will make clear that Wilder’s sense of time is neither static (either in the sense of eternal stasis or presentism) nor progressive. To that end, I will briefly examine the temporalities that we encounter in the first act of Wilder’s play, though without any pretensions to providing an exhaustive list. The first of these temporalities is that of narrative, of scene-setting. The Stage Manager, having explained the name and author of the play, announces that “The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn” (14). While he delivers this summary of the scene in the present, he also informs the audience that “Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital’s named after him” (16). This temporality looks
back at the events of the play from the future but speaks of them as occurring in a perpetual present akin to that of a literary text, a perpetual suspension of the passage of time that nevertheless abrogates itself either in the movement of plot or in the Stage Manager’s interjection that Dr. Gibbs, present in Act One, has since died. Narrative provides a present, in other words, that already knows its future, a present that is always already the past of some other present. Though narrative provides a means of articulating the interdependence of different temporalities, it would itself remain empty and insubstantial if these other times did not exist. In other words, narration is not a transcendent or all-seeing temporality, but one that depends immediately upon the expression of other, qualitatively different modes of time for its content.

As Wilder’s characters take the stage, we encounter the different temporal modes in quick succession. The introduction of Dr. Gibbs, who is returning home in the morning after having to make an unexpected call to deliver a pair of twins in the middle of the night, also introduces us to the temporality of chance, of the intrusive moment. This is the time of disjointedness and unpredictability, and is not bound either by the daily routines of sleeping and waking or of the carefully apportioned work-day. Insofar as the intrusion of chance is associated here with birth, it also marks itself as a source of potential novelty—chance allows for the intrusion of the new. It is also, in another sense, a temporality of necessity. When Dr. Gibbs says that he “Got that call at half past one this morning,” his call can be understood not only as a patient’s requirement of his services, but, more abstractly, as the call of chance that disrupts the more predictable rhythms of daily life by demanding an answer (16). Since this intrusive temporality of chance presupposes and requires these more predictable temporalities, Wilder sketches them out in short order. Just as he is returning home, Dr. Gibbs encounters Joe Crowell, Jr., who regularly delivers Mr. Webb’s paper, The Sentinel. Shortly after Joe makes his delivery
and departs, Howie Newsome, the milk deliverer, arrives with his horse Bessie. Both Joe and Howie are governed by a specific temporality of routine—that of habit, of more-or-less predictable rhythms and small cycles that make up part of daily life in the town. The familiar small-talk between Howie and the doctor also signifies this temporality, since it suggests an informal, somewhat variable rhythm in the time-world shared by the two men. Their small-talk not only establishes the predictability of habitual or routinized time, but also depicts the way that routine bends and changes before the disruption of chance; Howie is later than usual, which he blames on Bessie being “all mixed up about the [milk] route ever since the Lockharts stopped takin’ their quart of milk every day” (19). Here, the entanglement of various routines with what appears like chance from the limited perspective of a human observer disrupts what might otherwise appear as a kind of Arcadian or pastoral stasis.

So far, though, the temporal strands from which Grover’s Corners is woven are not especially complex; though there is a modicum of dynamism in the interactions between routine and chance, it is not until Wilder begins expanding the range of temporalities that the play approaches the kind of dynamic eternalism (or the mode of community) that I have ascribed to it. An especially significant addition to the temporal weave of Our Town occurs later in the morning, as the Gibbs children—Rebecca and George—get ready for school. As the household busies itself with the preparatory tasks of this routine, a factory whistle blows, prompting the Stage Manager to interrupt the action to explain that the whistle belongs to a blanket factory owned by the wealthy Cartwright family (22). The whistle, in a certain sense, marks two related modes of time. The first, and simplest, is another mode of cyclical routine, one that is stricter and more formalized than mere habit: the time of the work-day. Like chance, this temporality intervenes with the force of a necessity that must be answered; when the whistle blows, it not
only arrests the scene (the Stage Manager’s intervention draws us momentarily away from the events in the Gibbs and Webb households), but also restructures it, as it marks the start of breakfast. But Wilder uses the whistle to subtle effect in order to suggest that there is another, far broader, mode of time concealed beneath that of the work day. By showing the whistle’s effects not on the labourers it calls to work, but on the Gibbs and Webb children, Wilder implies that it not only calls them to finish preparing for school, but that their schooling in fact prepares them for the factory by disciplining them to its regimented, segmented, clock-measured mode of time. The symmetry that Wilder suggests between school-day and work-day draws our attention to the broader socio-historical process that underlies the proliferation of these kinds of formal cycles—namely, industrial capitalism itself.

The economic future of the town lies with the factory and, by extension, with the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the Cartwright family. The town is not a bucolic place without change, but one subject to the same economic and historical processes that condition the urbane modernisms of Wilder’s contemporaries; there is no impunity here from the movements of capital that produce the fast-paced, high-intensity experiences of pluralized time in the city centres. While the factory in one sense represents the rigid routines and formal cycles of the capitalist work-place, it also represents an irony: this frozen temporality that takes each day as a repetition of the preceding is not itself eternal (though it mimics a static eternity), but a direct product of a dynamic historical process of industrialization and the advancement of capital.\textsuperscript{115} Though Wilder’s examination of capitalist time in \textit{Our Town} never quite rises to the

\textsuperscript{115} Furthermore, early industrialization was not, in fact, an urban phenomenon, but predominantly a rural one, as David Harvey has observed: “Industrial capitalism developed in Britain on what we would now call greenfield sites […] On greenfield sites in the countryside, there was no regulatory apparatus to stop you—no town bourgeoisie, no guild organization. So most of the industrialization that occurred in Britain occurred on former village sites […] capital likes to move to greenfield sites whenever it can” (298). Though \textit{Our Town} takes place in the early 1900s, well after the early stages of industrialization in the United States, Grover’s Corners nevertheless fits the description
level of a systematic critique, the socially disruptive effects of rampantly expanding capitalism had come to occupy a significant place in his thinking about American society. Konkle, for instance, writes that Wilder’s 1935 novel *Heaven’s My Destination*, the major work immediately preceding *Our Town*, is in part an examination of “how certain aspects of Puritanism have been secularized in a Franklinesque conversion to capitalism in American culture at large” (124), while David Castronovo numbers “capitalistic greed, exploitation, denial of vital possibilities, and neurosis” among the dominant themes of *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which Wilder first staged in the winter of 1938, the same year as *Our Town* (qtd. in Konkle 151). In *Our Town*, Wilder’s conspicuous references to symbols of capitalism—here the factory, later the bank—suggest that the apparent stasis of everyday life in Grover’s Corners must be understood against the backdrop of the dynamic historical processes that make the town a sort of frontier of an expanding industrial capitalism.

Capitalist progress manifests its own time-world in which the present is one point on an inevitable trajectory toward ever-greater wealth, efficiency, and industrialization; however, this time-world also co-opts other temporalities, such as routine, which it formalizes, rigidifies, and distributes as the strict time-cycles of the work-day that intrude on the play with such demanding force, as in the whistle that reorders the action of the breakfast scene. Thus, capitalism as a relation between labour and property exists in its own time-world of progress (and history, as we will see), but takes hold of others that it transforms and installs in the lives of the citizens. Though Grover’s Corners still retains much of its rural character and has not yet been entirely dominated by signifiers of capitalism like the Cartwrights’ factory or the bank, it is in the process of these greenfield sites, and it is worth noting that the industrial-era changes wrought in many cities was in fact a result of a parallel process of industrialization in rural areas.
of becoming so—the dominant rhythms of town life are already those of capital. Shortly after the factory whistle blows, the Gibbs children begin to argue about their allowance money. Rebecca, who dutifully saves her money from week to week, asks her mother, “Mama, do you know what I love most in the world—do you?—Money” (23). Wilder suggests that the historical transformation that capitalism has begun to effect in Grover’s Corners even conditions the children’s desires. When they rush out the door as the school-bell rings, it is as though they have heard the echo of the factory whistle that earlier marked the beginning of the work-day. When they exclaim that they “gotta hurry,” they demonstrate that they have already learned the cliché of industrial capitalism and the lesson of the factory punch clock: time is money and it must be made to count (23).

The immanence of the capitalist time-world to these others, the way that it informs the interaction between them, raises the question of whether Our Town itself endorses a progressive vision of time. Does the play see time as moving toward an inevitable telos that promises the improvement of human conditions? My reading answers both questions in the negative. On the contrary, since the play’s object is eternity, and not any particular kind of time, and since eternity is only the structure of articulation of an infinitude of different time-worlds, we cannot really affirm that the play privileges any one temporality or another. Our Town is not progressive in its own right; it presents a world in which progressive time-worlds exist, that is, in which it is possible to read time as the progress of capital. But it makes no sense in Wilder’s eternalism to speak of “time” in the abstract, or to ascribe an intrinsic progress, cycle, or linearity to eternity—it must remain dynamic. The time-world of capitalist progress is immanent to the community, but not in its own right—it is not the totality of time, but only a mode of time that has subjugated and dominated others in order to present itself as a kind of false eternity. Though capital depends
on a temporality of progress, it also presupposes that this progress is itself eternal. It is this false
eternity of temporal subordination that Wilder emblematizes in his caricature in the Cowley
letter of the genteel Emerson luxuriating in communion with eternity while maids exhaust
themselves in his kitchen.

Later in Act One, the Stage Manager intervenes at the end of a conversation between
Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs in order to announce that the play will skip ahead by several hours.
In the brief interlude that follows, he offers the audience “a little more information about the
town, kind of a scientific account,” to which end he conjures Professor Willard from the local
State University (26). In short order, Willard proceeds through geological, anthropological, and
analytical-statistical modes of explanation, each of which implies a qualitatively distinct way of
being constituted in time. Though the Stage Manager warns him that “unfortunately our time is
limited,” the Professor begins his account by examining the town from the perspective of the
deepest of deep geologic time: “Grover’s Corners lies on the old Pleistocene granite of the
Appalachian range. I may say it’s some of the oldest land in the world,” made up of “Devonian
basalt” and “Mesozoic shale” (27). Again, the Stage Manager’s comment conceals an important
ironic detail, emphasizing not only that he has little time in which to hear Professor Willard’s
account, but also that human life, in comparison to the practically infinite scale of deep time, is
fleeting. There is an implicit contrast between the narrative present, which constitutes the town
as something living at the speed of the narrative’s action, and the unfathomably deep foundations
on which the Professor grounds his examination. For Professor Willard, geologic or deep time is
the natural basis on which to begin any scientific account of Grover’s Corners; for Wilder, this
allusion to the imperceptibly slow rhythms and ancient pressures built in near-eternity amidst
silent rock remind the audience: the familiar temporal rhythms of daily life presuppose and
depend upon temporalities that are radically inhuman and alien. By emphasizing the fact that Grover’s Corners inhabits “some of the oldest land in the world,” Professor Willard stakes a claim for the town’s distinction that would resist, however slightly, the homogenizing progress of industrial capitalism. Further, the modality of deep time functions as a kind of indelible, but obscure, memory, as Willard’s allusion to the “unique fossils” discovered in Silas Peckham’s pasture suggests. The earth and stone remember what other temporalities cannot.

Willard moves on from deep time to genealogical and statistical modes of past and present. In delivering the former, he uses the language of turn-of-the-century race science: “Early Amerindian stock. Cotahatchee tribes [...] possible traces in three families. Migration toward the end of the seventeenth century of English brachiocephalic blue-eyed stock [...] Since then, some Slav and Mediterranean” (27). This genealogical account constitutes time historically, in the limited sense that it traces patterns of change over time and links a relatively distant past to the present, but it is a history divorced from any sense of present consequences and devoid of interpretative content. It shares this lack with the third temporality that the Professor invokes, that of the statistical or analytical present: “The population, at the moment, is 2,642. The Postal District brings in 507 more, making a total of 3,149” (28). In a sense, this is a temporality without duration—it is not so much a time that could be lived as an analysis of the present into parts that, like the historical settlement patterns of the Professor’s genealogy, signify nothing in their own right. These temporalities are analytical, whereas the earlier, “lived-in” times of routine and chance are experiential. One could read Wilder’s portrayal of Professor Willard as a caricature of single-mindedly empirical or scientific modes of understanding structures that are, in large measure, social, such as communities. The Professor sees a complex entity like a community only in terms that can be measured; his accounts, taken in isolation, erase the
specificity and individuality of the parts of the whole they purport to explain, so that a citizen is either a mixture of a given set of gene pools or a raw number. From a dynamic eternalist perspective, it is precisely the fact that these temporalities cannot account for the community on their own that is significant, since it exemplifies the poverty of any account of a complex entity according to a single temporal rhythm. Importantly, though, this position also implies that it would be impossible to give a full picture of the life of a community such as Grover’s Corners without these analytical, depersonalized temporalities, and particularly without connecting these temporalities to others. Understanding the interdependence of the multiplicity of time-worlds that constitute the community gives us access to a fuller and less impoverished sense of that community.

The same is true of the “political and social report” that the Stage Manager asks Mr. Webb, the publisher and editor of the *Grover’s Corners Sentinel*, to deliver. Mr. Webb’s report introduces us to the temporality of the socio-political present, which explains the essence of Grover’s Corners in the present moment in terms of broad social, political, and religious identities. Mr. Webb notes that men vote at the age of twenty-one, that women vote indirectly, and that most of the town belongs to the lower middle class (28). When he moves on to discuss political and religious affiliations, his account of the present takes on a similarly statistical and abstract quality as the Professor’s examination of the town population: “Politically, we’re eighty-six per cent Republicans; six per cent Democrats; four per cent Socialists; rest, indifferent. Religiously, we’re eighty-five per cent Protestants; twelve per cent Catholics; rest, indifferent” (28). Mr. Webb’s repetition of the word “indifferent” here provides us with the specific quality of his and the Professor’s analytical modes of constituting the present: they are fundamentally indifferent to the qualitative experiences of the citizens they abstract into statistical figures and
percentages. And yet, while the Professor’s statistical account of the present is wholly abstracted from any lived experiences of time, from any really inhabited present, Mr. Webb’s socio-political report is a step closer to concreteness. The socio-political present is necessarily bound up with the temporalities of informal and formal routine (habit and the work-day), inasmuch as this picture of the town as predominantly middle class, Republican, and Protestant depends on these modes of experiencing time in order to provide determinate content to its abstractions.

Several scenes later, shortly after a scene that establishes the relationship between George Gibbs and Emily Webb, whose courtship and marriage are the core of the play’s second act, the Stage Manager interrupts the action again to provide another round of background information about the town. These digressions provide a rhythmic alternation of scale, a weaving together of the personal with the communal, the lives of the Gibbs and Webb families with events in the town; here, in the intervention that follows the scene between George and Emily, the Stage Manager introduces us to a new time-world that is significant not only because it provides a necessary complement to capitalist progress, but because of the symbolic significance of the scene in which it appears. The Stage Manager interrupts the action to tell us that “the Cartwright interests have just begun building a new bank in Grover’s Corners” and are preparing a collection of representative objects to be buried with the building’s cornerstone “for people to dig up … a thousand years from now” (35, my italics). So far, the package contains copies of the New York Times, Mr. Webb’s Sentinel, the Bible, the United States Constitution, and the plays of Shakespeare. The cornerstone deposit suggests another mode of material memory: the time capsule. Though hardly unusual today, time capsules were novelties in 1938, when Wilder published Our Town. James Gleick observes in his recent history of the idea of time travel that “the first self-conscious attempts at wholesale cultural preservation for the sake of a notional
future” were the Thornwell Jacobs’s “Crypt of Civilization,” built at Oglethorpe University from 1937 to 1940, and the Westinghouse Electric Corporation’s time capsule, buried under the grounds of the New York World’s Fair in 1939 (168-74). Gleick connects the sudden interest in time capsules to a growing popular and scientific fascination in Europe and the Americas with ancient history and archaeological discoveries such as that of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922 (171). If archaeology “helped people think about the future as well as the past,” it also helped to encourage the interest in time capsules as a kind of “reverse archaeology” (171, 174). Wilder’s juxtaposition of Professor Willard’s genealogical history of Grover’s Corners with the later references to the time capsule suggests this connection between the search for origins and the desire to secure a relation of the present for the future—to discover and herald the eternity that is already immanent in the lived moment. The reference to a time capsule in Our Town reflects an especially modish concern: the Oglethorpe crypt was being conceived and built at the same time as Wilder wrote his play, but neither it nor the Westinghouse capsule had yet been completed. It is all the more significant that Wilder transports this cultural fashion of the late 1930s back in time to 1901, thus further undercutting the association of small towns with a kind of static, timeless pastoralism. This anachronism suggests that Wilder understood the ways that small towns, just as much as cities, were sites of contest between capitalist regimes of time and the competing modes that they tended to disrupt.

There were clear reasons of garnering public good-will and publicity behind Westinghouse’s time capsule efforts; symbolically, these gestures also suggested that powerful

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Gleick notes that cornerstone deposits (such as the one in Our Town) are considerably older than time capsules as such and often functioned as votive offerings rather than self-conscious image-tailoring of the present for future consumption (176). And yet, Wilder writes of the cornerstone deposit in Our Town with the future very much in mind. His characters treat it explicitly like a time capsule, to be dug up and examined in the future, and not the naïve ward against superstition that Gleick describes.
capitalist enterprises possessed a certain rightful custodianship over the way the present presented itself, as it were, to the future. Wilder’s association of the time capsule with a bank, rather than a Westinghouse-like company, makes the link between time and capital in modern America unavoidable. As the Stage Manager’s pun on the Cartwright interests implies, the bank represents the time-world of interest—not literal interest, since we hear of no characters who actually take loans from the bank, but interest as an analogy for a purely capitalist form of historicity that tends to be co-articulated with the futurity of capitalist progress. Marx describes “interest-bearing capital” as an abridgement of the general formula for the circulation of capital in which money becomes self-reproducing (256-57).\footnote{In Marx’s famous general formula, M-C-M’, a buyer exchanges a quantity of money (M) for a given commodity (C), which can then be exchanged on the market for a sum in surplus of the original amount (M’). Monetary interest condenses this formula into M-M’, a form of circulation in which “money which is worth more money, value which is greater than itself” (257). See 
\textit{Capital Volume I}, 247-57.} A lending entity—the Cartwright bank, for example—lends a sum of money from which it periodically extracts another sum. When the loan is fully repaid, the cumulative extracted sum is the surplus-value produced from it. From the perspective of the capitalist lender, this ongoing extraction of surplus from the loan is the very reason for lending in the first place. In temporal terms, an event of the past (the loan) sustains a present relation (indebtedness) that is defined by parasitism (of the lender on the borrower) and dependence (of the borrower on the lender). I use the term “interest” to name the capitalist mode of history because lending, in a sense, manifests the insistency of the past, of its power to continue defining the present, until the minimum surplus can be extracted from the past event. Thus, the time-world of interest shapes the past-present relation into something rigid and linear. It insists on the dependence of the present on the past (thus foreclosing the possibility of any Nietzschean “unhistorical” uses of history), just as the state of indebtedness is determined by the event of the loan—but it delivers this present to the time-world of capitalist progress, which
takes this present as verification of its own conception of history as the dissemination and intensification of the flows of capital. What the time-world of capitalist historicity refuses to forget, what remains indelible in it, are the traces of economic circulation, profit, and surplus-value that function as the necessary conditions for the development of capital in the present. In turn, capitalist progress figures this present as a moment in its own inevitable fulfilment.

How, though, do the items in the time capsule relate to capital’s parasitic, extractive historicity? Two things are noteworthy. Firstly, the capsule’s contents are made up entirely of texts; they make up what we might read as a canon of “great works” that will represent the town’s values in literature (Shakespeare), politics (the Constitution), religion (the Bible), and current affairs (the two newspapers) to future generations. And yet, these texts were not decided on by the town, but by the Cartwrights, who have asked a friend of the Stage Manager’s for further advice (35). The contents, then, are less representative of the town than of its capitalist class. Though these texts may or may not be representative of a town as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant as Grover’s Corners, the fact remains that only the Cartwrights have thus far had a say in the contents. Secondly, and further, all of the items can be read as relating in some way to capital. Shakespeare’s apotheosis as “the Bard” was inseparable from the emergence of a profitable performance industry around his works (Bristol 28). The Fifth Amendment of the Constitution affirms property, along with life and liberty, as basic personal rights. Though the Bible condemns usury and interest (the basis of the Cartwright bank’s profitability), Wilder was acutely aware of the ease with which American Christianity could be secularized in the “Franklinesque conversion to capitalism” to which Konkle alludes (124).  

118 The New York

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118 The Old Testament forbids the Hebrews to charge interest to one another but does not explicitly forbid the charging of interest to other groups (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Exodus 22.25, Leviticus 25.35-37), while the
Times, one of the two papers included in the capsule, reports from and on the financial capital of the United States. The version of the present that the Cartwrights are “interested” (so to speak) in preserving is one that pays interest back—it bears the marks of capital, preserving only what capital has found useful. Unearthed in the future, the capsule from the past would present an implicit progress narrative, suggesting how these preserved elements of the past manifested an embryonic, earlier form of capitalism that required a capitalist future as its telos and fulfillment. The Cartwright bank literalizes this scenario, insofar as it will literally be built upon the memorial fragments of this essentially capitalist account of Grover’s Corners.

The time-worlds of capitalist historicity (or interest) and progress are a fundamental component of the town’s real constitution in time, but they are also aberrant since they weave themselves into a position of domination over others. These capitalist time-worlds present themselves as absolute, totalizing, universal, and without alternative—as eternity itself, even if only one that is to be unfurled by the progress of history.119 The Stage Manager’s thoughts about the time capsule are instructive of the tension between Our Town’s desire to imagine a mode of community adequate to a dynamic, non-totalizing conception of eternalism and its obligation to depict, as part of the totality of times that comprise the community, the totalizing impetus of capitalism. He muses aloud that “Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about ‘em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts…and contracts for the sale of slaves” (35). Just as the Cartwrights’ capsule includes only items that have been of use to capital, the Stage Manager’s historical memory of the Babylonians contains only the detritus of

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119 This eternity unfurled at the end of progress would look something like the vision of liberal democracy that Francis Fukuyama advanced in The End of History and the Last Man, in which a long process of historical evolution results in the exhaustion of alternative forms of government.

most famous New Testament statement on usury is Jesus’s expulsion of the money-lenders from the Temple (John 2.13-16).
commerce—contracts for the sale of commodities (in which human life is reduced to a mere trade good) and the names of the kings who brokered them. Though Babylon of course precedes the historical emergence of capitalism, the juxtaposition of these particular fragments of its economic history with those that the Cartwrights’ bank will preserve of Grover’s Corners suggests a particular weaving of temporalities into a conception of history as the birth, maturity, and apotheosis of capitalism. The Babylonian past gets woven into the time-worlds of interest and capitalist progress.

The figures of the Cartwrights suggest this apotheosis or elevation of capital to eternity. They are people, but the play does not personalize them. They exist only by reference, as invisible owners of the local means of production; even the sites of capital that they own, the factory and the bank, have only an inferential, flickering existence in the play, despite their enormous importance for the town’s economic life. The Cartwrights and their capital are the “invisible hands,” so to speak, building up the town and at the same time weaving its heterogeneous temporalities together, making them dependent on the capital that they provide. In this respect, the Cartwrights’ ownership of both the factory and the bank is especially significant. In his 1917 polemic *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin argues that the distinguishing feature of twentieth century capitalism is the coalescence of industrial and banking capital into a single form—finance (203). Among the essential elements of finance capital, Lenin lists the consolidation of competing market actors into cartels and monopolies (204), and the domination of the *rentiers*, those who live on the incomes of money capital, such as rent and interest (213). Notably, he dates the beginning of the high period of finance capital to the “boom at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900-03,” after which cartels “become one of the foundations of the whole of economic life” (183). Intentionally or otherwise,
Wilder embeds these circumstances in *Our Town*.\(^\text{120}\) Not only does the play’s first act take place in 1901, amid the depression of 1900-03, but the Cartwrights themselves represent the fusion of industry and banking into a single monopolistic force, insofar as they own both the factory and the bank. In a sense, Wilder’s Cartwrights must be read as vanguards of a newly monopolistic, agglomerative capital emerging just as the action of the play begins. The temporal equivalent of this monopolism is the false eternity of capital, which *Our Town* expresses in the relation between the time-worlds of capitalist historicity and progress, and the other temporalities that comprise Grover’s Corners.

And yet, these other temporalities assert themselves in unexpected ways. Though the Stage Manager can see in Babylon’s history only the remnants of commerce, he feels the absence of those quotidian temporalities that have not been preserved in the historical record, and which we encounter in the first pages of *Our Town*: “Yet every night all those [Babylonian] families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney,—same as here” (35). The Stage Manager invokes a temporality of the analogical, dehistoricized present and tries to join it to the temporality of informal routine. For the Stage Manager, this time removed from history is, ironically, a way of restoring the Babylonians and their communal lives to a historical memory that has tended to preserve what is of interest to capital. To be sure, this is a decidedly modest gesture of resistance—the Stage Manager knows nothing of the people whose habits he claims were analogous to his own; further, though his analogy pierces the reductivism of capitalist history, he ironically reinstates a similar reductivism by finding in the quotidian existence of the Babylonians only a copy of daily life in Grover’s

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\(^{120}\) Nothing in my research suggests that Wilder was familiar with Lenin’s tract; however, since Lenin’s argument is an interpretation of empirical data about objective changes in the world economy, Wilder could just as well have recognized these changes himself.
Corners. Like the analytical temporalities introduced by Professor Willard and Mr. Webb, then, the analogical present is insufficient in its own right, and must be interwoven with a multiplicity of other temporalities. The Babylonians will remain paper figures, simulacra of twentieth-century Americans, as long as it is possible to imagine them only in terms of their similarity to the present.

A more complicated subversion of the false eternity of capital is the Stage Manager’s plan “to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone [so] the people a thousand years from now’ll know a few simple facts about us” (36). This moment foregrounds the inherent tension in Our Town’s approach to time—namely, that Wilder’s effort to find a literary form capable of expressing a mode of co-articulate and interdependent community modelled on a real, living eternity cannot proceed except through the expression of the time-worlds of capital, which posits itself in the place of eternity, as the very structure of what is real. To express the living dynamism of a purely immanent eternity, Wilder cannot avoid expressing the false eternity of capital. Since it is not the aim of Our Town to produce a systematic critique of capitalism, it has no means of resolving this tension; however, it does produce an immanent critique, albeit a partial and somewhat obscured one, of capitalist conditions. The play interrogates these conditions even as it takes them as part of its own structure; it expresses a fundamental desire for alternatives to the rhythms of life that capital imposes, even if it must move with these rhythms to imagine something other. The Stage Manager declares a seemingly modest reason for

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121 Capitalism must be understood as both a dynamic and a static force. It is dynamic inasmuch as its real essence is wholly in time, wholly historical, wholly expressive of living and malleable relations between forces of production; however, it imposes itself as an expression of supposedly immutable, and thus, in a way, natural laws. To the degree that these laws present themselves as the without-alternative, capitalism is static. On this point, see Marx’s introduction to the Grundrisse (83-111).
including *Our Town* in the bank time capsule: To preserve the historical memory that “This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying” (36).

Though he wants to ensure the survival of some memory of the specificity and particularity of Grover’s Corners, the play, as we have seen, does not depict these temporal rhythms in themselves, but in their subjection to the time-worlds of capital and the rigid, repetitious temporalities of work that they proliferate. What the play will preserve, in other words, is the very problematic structure that we have been examining—it cannot be a neutral record. Even the peculiar rhetorical structure of the Stage Manager’s intentions reproduces the contradiction. His lines deploy two devices: anaphora, or the repetition of a beginning sequence of words, and isocolon, or the parallel repetition of sentence elements of similar length. Just as capital imposes the strict, identical cycles of work on Grover’s Corners (the temporality of formal routine), the Stage Manager introduces each element with the words “in our.” These repeated elements impose a predictable, regular rhythm on the rhetorical presentation of the practices that supposedly define the specific, differential quality of life in the town. Likewise, the isocolon renders the distinguishing practices relatively indistinct from one another, reducing them to the same grammatical forms—“growing,” “marrying,” “living,” “dying.” Even the Stage Manager’s use of verbal nouns is analogical to the way that capital imposes itself on dynamic temporalities as being an end of history, a false eternity, or a stasis without alternative. Unlike the gerunds or present participles that they resemble morphologically, these verbal nouns are primarily nominal, and not verbal, in quality—grammatically, they are kinds of being, not kinds of doing or acting. They suggest the dynamic, active quality of verbs, but arrest it in the stasis of a noun. Even here, then, the Stage Manager’s words betray the static eternity that has calcified otherwise dynamic temporalities. Nevertheless, by expressing the formal, structural persistence
of the static time-worlds of capital even in the moment that he attempts to counteract them, to preserve some sense of the real, living dynamism of the present for the future, the Stage Manager unwittingly redirects our attention to what capital forecloses and, in foreclosing, renders necessary: the constitution of a kind of eternity beyond this stasis, a real, living eternity made up of the necessary coexistence or co-articulation of a multiplicity of heterogeneous moments—an eternity that would require the disarticulation and independence of these moments from the supremacy of capital.

In what remains of this section, I turn from Our Town’s oblique immanent critique of the false eternity of capital to the later moments of the play that try to imagine what a community predicated on eternity as a dynamic, living structure would look like. Wilder develops this conception most powerfully in the opening and closing sections of Act Three, but gestures toward it in the closing scene of Act One, which finds George and Rebecca Gibbs reflecting on the moon at the close of day. Rebecca is particularly awe-struck by the sight, which leads her to wonder if the same moon is “shining on South America, Canada, and half the whole world” (44). Her thoughts mark a distinct depersonalization and “zooming out” of the play’s temporalities as the act nears its end. Roughly speaking, Our Town moves from the deeply personal times that punctuate the lives of individuals (chance, informal habit) to progressively less personal ones (deep time, genealogical history, the statistical present, capitalist progress and historicity). Here, we arrive at a temporality that is no longer measured by beings on the earth, nor even by processes within the earth, but by the indifferent light of the moon. Rebecca imagines a mode of present time that is not merely present, but presence together, a kind of hemispheric, simultaneous time-in-common. And yet, since Rebecca can posit nothing about the other lives who experience the same moon, this “in-common” cannot be thought of as a homogenization of
the experience of time, nor as positing any final presentism, since any other lives beneath the moon are presumably differentiated and determined in similar myriads of ways as those of Grover’s Corners. Anne Fletcher takes a similar view of time in *Our Town*, albeit by different means, noting that “*Our Town* is chronotropic [sic] in its expression of the journey from birth through life to death and beyond, specific (illustrating both the daily and the everyday), and universal. Time is depicted both chronologically and as tenseless, simultaneous” (174). I read Wilder’s temporality of presence or simultaneity here as a mode of gathering, a means of drawing equally heterogeneous temporalities together without subjecting them to any overarching, really hierarchical structure. The temporalities that compose those who view the same moon as Rebecca do not share a single identity or ultimate being, but only a single plane of relation. Simultaneity is the time of shared dependence, inasmuch as all who see in the light of the moon can do so only because the moon is shining; and yet, lest this relation suggest a kind of hierarchy, the moon is not itself independent or autonomous. The moon does not cast an original light, but only reflects that of the sun, the traditional symbol of eternity.

The end of the act, though, poses a problem for interpreting Wilder’s eternity as immanent and dynamic, rather than transcendent and static. Rebecca remembers the address on a letter that a friend once received from a minister: “Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America […] Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God” (46). The address seems on one hand to complete the “zooming out” of time-scales, but, tellingly, it no longer speaks of time. The moonlight adds to the play’s weave of temporalities a shareable present that provides the necessary condition for conceiving of heterogeneous time-worlds as co-articulate and interdependent. What is telling here, though, is that we appear to have
abandoned time for space, though ultimately, once we reach “the Mind of God,” even that falls away. The address on the minister’s letter not only relinquishes time and space, but gives the sense that, as we move beyond these dimensions, we also move up the hierarchy of things, until we reach the divine apex. It is crucial to preserve the distinction between the static, transcendent eternalism of the minister’s letter and the immanent, dynamic eternalism that I have ascribed to Wilder. The distinction becomes clearer if we understand that the passage alludes directly to Emerson, who began his own career as a minister and who Wilder sharply criticizes in the 1952 letter to Cowley that I discuss above. The phrase “Mind of God” has a conspicuously Emersonian flavor; indeed, in Nature, the work that secured his early fame, Emerson asserts that “material forms preëxist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God” (25, my italics). Later, he makes an explicit link between the ideal world, God, and eternity: “seen in the light of thought, the world always is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind. Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion […] as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity” (39). This is Emerson speaking as an unalloyed idealist with an unambiguously static conception of eternity. It is in their existence as ideas that things are eternal and that they directly express the power of God. Just as the address on the minister’s letter passes linearly from Jane Crofut to the Mind of God, scaling the chain of being, Emerson speaks in Nature of a “ray of relation” that passes from “man” to all other things and, in turn, from “man” back to God (21). Though I have argued that Emerson’s views in “History,” the preface to The Dial, and certainly in the later “Fate,” are far less static in their conception of eternity, Wilder’s letter to Cowley suggests a view of Emerson as representative of this vision of static, hierarchical eternity.
Though Wilder lets the letter speak for itself in the play, he contrasts Rebecca’s wonder with a provocatively cryptic exclamation from George: “What do you know!” (46). The line can be read either as an expression of thoughtful bemusement or as a challenge. If we take the latter reading, George is asking Rebecca—and us, by extension—how we could ever know such an eternity as the one from on high (from the shoulders of a colossus, as it were) that the Emersonian minister proposes? Wilder does not quite usher the audience toward this skeptical reading, but the ambiguity of George’s expression ensures that the minister’s eternity does not go unchallenged. It is perhaps telling, too, that Wilder presents this vision as being delivered and appealing primarily to children, to Jane Crofut and Rebecca. The letter, after all, takes its eternity as a matter of course, as dogma, and arrives at it simply by abstracting away all situation in space and time until no world remains. In the context of the play, we might understand it as a naïve eternity that lacks precisely the skepticism that George seems, by one reading, to supply.

Wilder’s most sustained positive articulation of dynamic eternity and the mode of community whose model it provides is in the Stage Manager’s extended monologue at the beginning of Act Three, as he familiarizes the audience with the cemetery where Emily will observe her own funeral. The noteworthy physical feature of the cemetery is its position on a windswept hilltop that overlooks the town. It is not only a place of death, but of synopsis, from which a person can see all of the physical features (Lake Sunapee and Lake Winnipesaukee, the White Mountains, Mt. Washington, Mt. Monadnock) and neighboring towns (Conway, North Conway, Jaffrey, East Jaffrey, Peterborough, Dublin) which define and delimit Grover’s Corners (80). This synopsis, though, must be understood as a seeing altogether, rather than a seeing

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122 In its presentation of death from the perspective of the dead, Our Town’s final act echoes Masters’s Spoon River Anthology (1915) and Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (1930), which also use death as a means of examining the nature of eternity and time.
everything—if one needs a looking glass to see all of these environs, it is, of course, because there is more to see than the eye alone can manage. A viewer from the hill does not see all that there is to see, but only a multiplicity of places in a particular relation—she sees the structure of her surroundings. Similarly, the eternity that Wilder associates with the cemetery must not be understood in this totalizing sense, as a timeless externality, but as the structure woven from the co-articulation of a multiplicity of different times. In the cemetery scene, the Stage Manager obliquely suggests the inadequacy of modes of community predicated on static, transcendent, or totalizing eternalisms. He points to the oldest headstones, which date as far back as the 1670s. These belong to “Strong-minded people that come a long way to be independent” and often attract genealogists paid for by wealthy “city people” who “want to make sure they’re Daughters of the American Revolution and of the Mayflower” (80). Wilder rejects both the colonists’ dream of an autonomous, self-sufficient community (whatever his admiration for their force of will) and their supposed descendants’ sense of community as lineage or filiation. Though the colonists may have achieved a modicum of religious and political autonomy, no such thing is possible from the perspective of time, since the sense or meaning of their community is dependent on those who would weave the colonial past into their present, such as the modern Bostonians who regard descent from the colonial families as a marker of privilege. But the Bostonians’ sense of community, inasmuch as it depends on the unidirectional transmission of a lineage that cannot be shared except by birth, limits the scope of community to a few privileged families. It is ultimately aristocratic, and thus reinstates the transcendent structure of a static eternity in which there is a difference in kind between mere time and a privileged eternity. “Wherever you come near the human race,” remarks the Stage Manager of these genealogists and their backers, “there’s layers and layers of nonsense” (80).
As he continues his tour of the cemetery, the Stage Manager pauses among the graves of the Civil War dead, mere boys who “had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they’d never seen more than fifty miles of it themselves. All they knew was the name [...] The United States of America. And they went and died about it” (80). The text of *Our Town* marks the transition between the “nonsense” of the human race and the comments on the Civil War graves in the Stage Manager’s dialogue with an ellipsis, which renders the passage ambiguous and, potentially, ambivalent (80). On one hand, the Stage Manager marvels that, in contrast to the city people looking for their ancestors, the Civil War dead understood their own welfare as dependent on the survival of a community of others with whom they had no direct relationship. In this sense, the Union represents a step beyond the community of filial descent and blood relation toward one rooted in the temporality of presence that Rebecca discovers in the moon in Act One (the Union as a world shared in common). On the other hand, the Stage Manager sounds wary of these young men’s willingness to die and be subsumed for the sake of “a notion.”¹²³ It is equally possible to inflect the discussion of the Civil War dead with lamentation and disbelief as with awe or admiration. Similarly, if the Union can be read as representing a community of presence and a recognition of the interdependence of the local and a broader totality, it could just as soon be understood as a community whose abstraction is analogous to the static, transcendent eternalism of the minister’s letter to Jane Crofut, albeit to a different extent, to the level of the national, rather than the universal or divine.

¹²³ The Stage Manager’s ambivalence toward the willing self-sacrifice of the war dead reflects the ambivalence that Wilder himself felt toward the First World War. Throughout 1917, Wilder agonized about what role, if any, he should play in the war, and recalled having nightmares about fighting in the trenches (Niven 133). Wilder was eventually conscripted and served with the 1st Coast Artillery Corps at Fort Adams, Rhode Island; though he did not experience the trenches first-hand, his brother Amos fought in France, where he suffered from what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (Niven 165-66).
In the final section of his monologue, the Stage Manager tries to enunciate a basis for community in the nature of the eternal; however, what proves most instructive is not what he succeeds in articulating, but what remains, for him, inarticulate and inarticulable. He declares that “We all know that something is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars…everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings” (81). Houses rise and fall and are inherently bound by time; so, too, are names, which signify language and cultural transmission or memory.

Alternatively, we could consider houses and names as symbols of the eternities of the monument and of fame, respectively. While these have often been derided as false conceptions of eternity, the stars have long been taken seriously as symbols of eternity’s timelessness; however, the indifferent perpetuity of the heavens is alien to the eternity that Wilder has in mind. Wilder also suggests in this passage that the Stage Manager has no privileged relationship to eternity. He is not a Colossus bestriding the world, as Wilder called Emerson, but a character whose very embeddedness within the play’s structure of relations prevents him from being able to articulate that structure without being structured by it. His meta-dramatic status does not challenge this situation, but in fact emphasizes it, since even the Stage Manager’s knowledge of the past, present, and future circumstances of Grover’s Corners, even his apparently compendious knowledge of its existence over time, is insufficient to give him any definitive sense of what eternity is, except that it implicates people like those to whom he has introduced us over the course of the play.

And yet, the fact that eternity cannot be articulated as a totality

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124 Consider Percy Bysshe Shelley’s mockery of Ramesses II’s monument in “Ozymandias,” or the arguments of Stoics such as Epicurus against fame-seeking.

125 The apparent anthropocentrism of the Stage Manager’s claim that eternity “has to do with human beings” might appear to be inconsistent with the prevailing anti-anthropocentrism of Spinoza’s philosophy. It should be noted, though, that the Stage Manager never declares eternity to pertain exclusively to human beings, only that there is something “that’s eternal about every human being” (81).
does not mean that the “something” to which the Stage Manager refers is likewise foreclosed. The “something” is the knowledge of the interdependence of any given moment of time on a multiplicity of others. Though the Stage Manager cannot tell us what this eternity is, he has already presented it to us as the very structure of the community of Grover’s Corners, as the pervasive reciprocal determination of its vast range of temporalities: narrative, chance, informal and formal routine, capitalist progress and historicity, deep time, genealogical history, the statistical and socio-political present, analogy, simultaneity or presence, and any number of others. The structure of the play’s action shows not only the interaction of these modes, but also their distortion and subjection to other temporalities, as in the subtle ways that the capitalist historicity and progress weave time in a way that closes off eternity and elevates capital in its place. And yet, the play’s other temporalities resist and function as alternatives to this elevation of capital to the status of false eternity. This is especially true of those temporalities associated with heavenly bodies, such as the lunar time-in-common that Rebecca experiences while gazing at the moon and the dynamic eternity that Wilder associates in the play’s final moments with the burning of the stars.

Though the Stage Manager cannot give us a picture of eternity in toto, by depicting and framing the temporal structure of Grover’s Corners, he indicates the possibility of an immanent analysis of eternity, an examination situated wholly within it, that can have no pretensions of capturing it in its totality. This is the kind of analysis that he makes possible by underscoring the diverse temporalities in Act One. Later, in Act Three, he helps Emily achieve this immanent perspective on her own life when she appeals to him to let her relive her twelfth birthday. Emily, who has spent the act observing her own funeral with the other dead townspeople in the cemetery, finds that returning to the day of her birthday with the full knowledge of how her life
will turn out in its aftermath is hardly bearable: “It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another” (95). By returning to the past to inhabit it in a radically different mode of time (she witnesses her past as a present, but one whose future she already knows, just as the Stage Manager observes the present of Act One), she recognizes that the moment to which she returns was far richer than she could have realized, richer even than it would have been possible for her to live: “I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed […] Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you […] Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” (95). Though one could read this sentiment as a version of the cliché that one must live life to its fullest, it also echoes a famous passage from Spinoza: “nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do” (EIII.P2s). For Spinoza, the richness of experience depends upon the fact that any given encounter between entities always involve a potentially infinite number of relations, since entities themselves are, in a sense, clusters of relations. For Emily, it is the infinitude of intersecting, co-articulate, and interdependent temporalities that renders this moment from her past unbearably rich. It is symbolic that Emily returns to her birthday—like a birth, her experience is both painful and rich with possibility, with the sense of genesis (she recognizes for the first time the real depth of her enmeshment in the lives of others). She understands in reliving the day that her life at that moment intersected with a vast array of time-worlds that she could not have experienced, which belonged, for instance, to her parents, or to her brother Wally, or to her own future, which her experience in that moment presumed, entailed, or depended upon. *Our Town* suggests that each moment is densely-woven time, a texture of dependencies, and that to “realize life” while living it—to live *sub specie aeternitatis*—is not to live as though time did not exist, but to live with this sense of interdependency in which no moment can be reducible to empty, homogeneous time.
Our Town ends in the solemn quiet of the night, after the mourners have returned home and the dead to their rest, with another brief address to the audience from the Stage Manager, who closes the play both by recapitulating the alternative between static and dynamic eternalism, and by recuperating the stars as a symbol of eternity:

There are the stars—doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky. Scholars haven’t settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there. Just chalk…or fire. Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. (98)

The question of eternity, in the end, is one of life—is eternity a lifeless, inert thing, like chalk, or is it a dynamism that writhes like fire? The question is not posed neutrally. In performance, the Stage Manager’s ellipsis must amount to a pregnant pause, a silence that punctuates the gap between dissatisfaction and promise, the eternities of transcendence and immanence. Looking to the sun (“this one”), the Stage Manager imagines a fire that, though it is no “living being,” nevertheless strives and persists in its striving, “straining away all the time to make something of itself.” The starry fire is Heraclitean, a dynamic rhythm of immanent becoming. The language of straining, and of straining toward no particular end but “to make something of itself,” suggests an analogy between the sun and Spinoza’s conatus, the innate drive in all existing things to persevere in and expand their existence. Like the sun that Emerson imagines in his preface to The Dial (much as Wilder might bristle at the comparison), and like Spinoza’s immanent cause, the straining of Wilder’s sun is at once the animating force behind its effects (the entangled lives that make up the community of Grover’s Corners), and is defined by these effects—it is not an independent, autonomous object, but a cause that is actualized as such only by its effects, just as Grover’s Corners, as a community, is nothing more or less than the co-articulation of the lives
that comprise it. Here, cause and effect are reciprocal, not linear or hierarchical relations. Though
the sun subtends the heterogeneous temporalities of Grover’s Corners as the condition that
makes their interweaving possible, its singular striving is expressible only in the multiple
rhythms of the characters’ striving, terms that are neither essentially progressive nor static. It
is with this immanentist conception of eternity that Wilder ends the act and, with it, the play—not
with chalk, but with fire.

IV. “Do these things die?”: Dynamic Historicism In the American Grain

If Wilder’s Our Town represents a relatively successful attempt to think a dynamic and
eternalist route between progressivism and presentism, Williams’s In the American Grain is a
more complicated case. Though this text is not explicitly interested in the metaphysical
categories of time and eternity, it develops a historical sensibility marked by a concern for the
immanence of the past. I earlier proposed the term “dynamic historicism” for this sensibility to
emphasize its contiguity with the dynamic eternalism of Emerson and Spinoza. But in what sense
is one justified in making the terminological leap from eternity to history, which have long been
conceived as opposites? In the American Grain does not treat history as the successive or
temporal alternative to a view of time as a static, simultaneous eternity, such as Williams could
well have read into Emerson, but rather as that which articulates, explicates, and ultimately
constitutes the eternal—the structure of relation between heterogeneous temporalities. This
position ends up being much closer to Emerson than Williams likely recognized. At the
convergence of history and eternity, Williams fashions a temporal sensibility that is different
from both the implicit presentism of Kora in Hell and Spring and All that he explored in the

126 On this point, see the earlier footnote on Emerson’s preface and the sun’s autonomy from the earth.
years before *In the American Grain* and the dense, accumulative detail of the previous century’s historical realism. History here becomes an immanent, creative cause of time that exists solely in the relations between its temporal effects. Its dynamism is unthinkable without this relation of discrete, heterogeneous moments, and cannot be reduced to the much-abused notion of “timelessness” or to a closed world in which all moments are given together harmoniously, in a time-without-relation.

Williams’s dynamic historicism follows the principle that moments are not passive and neutral, but clamour to be expressed and articulated, to preserve themselves in relation to other moments. There is a recognizably Nietzschean quality to this clamouring, analogous to a will to power, but localized in temporal moments rather than individuals; however, these dynamics also express a broadly Spinozan and Emersonian sensibility that has been largely overlooked. If Williams’s history comprises this clamouring of heterogeneous moments, there is nevertheless a sense that these moments structure themselves, that their striving to conjoin themselves with other moments in the present produces a structure that is wholly immanent to all other moments—a structure, in short, that is nothing other than the relation these moments attain with one another. This clamouring, then, is the mechanism by which heterogeneous assemblages of moments structure themselves in, and as, history. It is also this clamouring of temporalities against one another that checks and limits our freedom to intervene in the course of history. Williams vacillates between two impulses, one emphasizing the transcendent status of historical agents and narrators over history and striving to affirm in it a source of unconditioned agency or power to alter the meaning of history, and one emphasizing history’s status as structure, acknowledging the ineluctable experience of limitation. We can think of *In the American Grain* as a transitional text for Williams, one in which the presentist yearning of his major early works
encounters its own limitations and is forced to bend to them. In Williams’s earlier presentist works, the poetic voice assumes the power to valorize moments, withdrawing them from the flow of time by surcharging them with aesthetic attention. In the American Grain, by contrast, grants a slightly different mode of transcendent agency to the artist-historian figure, albeit one that the text itself undercuts. The artist-historian presents itself as world- and history-bestriding, like the Emersonian colossus that Wilder mocks in his letter to Cowley, but ultimately only proves its limitations in failing to transcend history. In this way, the approach to history that Williams’s text performs is distinct from many paradigmatic historicisms of the modernist period. In the American Grain’s present, for instance, is not the “homogeneous, empty time” that Walter Benjamin associates with progressive historicism, which reduces history to a field of consistent moments whose sole function is to convey the inevitable, ameliorative passage of events; however, nor is it like Benjamin’s alternative of “Jetztzeit,” or a “time filled by the presence of the now” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History” 261). While Jetztzeit marks the tremulous potency of a moment that has been wrenched out of the continuous flow of time and surcharged with revolutionary potential, In the American Grain’s emphasis is more Spinozan: no rhythm or assemblage of moments can give complete resistance to others or be isolated from the connexio, the structure, of time; strictly speaking, there can be no discontinuity. And yet, while Bergson (or at least the popular construction of Bergsonism) emphasized the liberating qualities of this continuity and the sense that the present is a perpetual making or synthesis of time, the very cutting edge of novelty, Williams’s dynamic historicism does not rest at this sense of temporal continuity. It seeks something more problematic and difficult: a freedom—that is, in this context, a power over history—that can be found not by seeking to live in the intuition, the immediacy, of the temporal flux at this given moment, as popular constructions of Bergsonism
tended to assume, but only in the adequate understanding of the causal limitations imposed on us by the historical structure. As Morfino puts it, “[t]o affirm the primacy of the weave of time over its straightening out into a line means to go beyond continuism or discontinuism, or rather, in a Spinozan fashion, to denounce both as imaginary simplifications of the complexity of the real” (14). Eternity and history name only the articulation of non-contemporaneous moments together within the structure of an open totality. In this way, a Spinozan or dynamistic view of eternity relinquishes any ontological primacy of the present moment and disperses it throughout all time; a given present is, in a sense, only a site of this dynamic weaving.

My approach to Williams’s history complements such recent work on the modernist historical imagination as Seamus O’Malley’s *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (2015) and Robert S. Lehman’s *Impossible Modernism: T. S. Eliot, Walter Benjamin, and the Critique of Historical Reason* (2016). These works approach modernism through its skepticism about language’s ability to represent history, on the one hand, and its insistence of the necessity of making the attempt, on the other. As Lehman puts it, for modernism “there is history, but it is reached only through a certain labour” (192). The solution that modernist historical novelists (O’Malley) and poets like Eliot (Lehman) found for this problem lay in the dual function of the literary text, which could at once construct historical narratives and reflect on the metahistorical problems raised by a self-conscious practice of history’s textual construction. My reading of Williams likewise foregrounds the double work of the text in both representing history and critiquing the limits of historical representation; however, from a dynamic historicist perspective, it is not the past’s alterity that challenges our ability to represent it, but rather its intimacy—the fact that heterogeneous assemblages of past moments are inherent in the present that they condition. If anything, history is too close and finely textured, too
meticulously and tightly woven, for us to see clearly. The issue is less that we can never really be true witnesses to history than that the structure to which we are supposed to bear witness is altered by what we choose to witness.\textsuperscript{127} Williams grounds his metahistorical reflections in the tension between the narration of history and the immanence of that narration within the historical fabric itself.

Williams’s work is split, though, between two divergent tendencies: the desire for transcendence or mastery and the insistence on the inescapable, unmasterable immanence of history. \textit{In the American Grain} presents itself, as Williams puts it in the autobiographical section of the “Père Sebastian Rasles” chapter, as an argument that “what [Americans] are has its origin in what \textit{the nation} in the past has been; that there is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do” (109). Williams’s narrators often seek out versions of this origin-point, whether in the “the absolute new without a law” (74), the “compact of violence and the shock of immediacy” (174), “the hidden flame” (204), or “the GROUND” (216). The search for origins reflects a desire to find and to occupy the transcendent or mastering position, to discover, narratively, the place from which American history coheres and from which a future can be charted—a place, in short, that conditions history, but is unconditioned by it. The second tendency that the above quotation expresses, though, the insistence on the immanence of history in the present, contradicts the implicit teleology of the search for origins. History is an immanence without an outside; as such, the search for a \textit{telos} either claims to impose the \textit{telos} from without, in a history-transcending (and history-negating) gesture or discovers that this imposition from without is invalid. Thus, Williams’s sense of the very term “American” drifts

\textsuperscript{127} In a strictly metaphorical sense, this problem is cognate with the one framed by Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in quantum physics: the act of observation exerts an influence over what one ultimately can observe; thus, no observation is, so to speak, innocent.
over the course of *In the American Grain*. His early chapters on the colonization of the Americas, such as “The Discovery of the Indies,” “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan,” and “The Fountain of Youth,” establish the parameters of “American” in broad, continental terms that are irreducible either to the geographic United States or to the history of Anglo-Saxon peoples in the Americas. In this sense, Williams strips the term “American” of a fixed essence, treating it instead as a kind of becoming, an immanent quality constituted in the unfolding of multiple historical encounters. This non-essentialist, perhaps pluralist aspect of Williams’s work has been of particular interest to scholars over the last twenty years, as more work has been devoted to exploring Williams’s Spanish-American family background.\(^{128}\) It is also worth noting that *In the American Grain* was one of a number of period texts, including Waldo Frank’s *Virgin Spain* (1926) and Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), that seemed to explore the possibility of a broadly pluralistic view of American culture akin to that proposed by writers like Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne in the previous decade.\(^{129}\)

From “Sir Walter Raleigh” onward, though, this expansive sense of “American” contracts, and though it remains plural (inasmuch as it is irreducible to “white Anglo-Saxon”), it becomes increasingly national in its parameters, marking a specific belonging to the United States. By the time the text culminates with the brief meditation on the redemptive, sacrificial figure of Lincoln, it is clearly a narrative of “the nation” rather than some broader, transnational conception of America. This transnational impetus clearly structures Williams’s accounts of the

\(^{128}\) Williams’s father was British-born, but grew up in the Caribbean, while his mother was born in Puerto Rico. The key text that precipitated interest in this version of Williams was Julio Marzán’s *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (1994). For more recent engagements with this line of thinking, see Peter Ramos’s “Cultural Identity, Translation, and William Carlos Williams” (2013), and Jen Hedler Phillis and Neri Sandoval’s “The New Williams” (2016).

\(^{129}\) Kallen’s 1915 article “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” and Bourne’s “Trans-National America,” published the following year, argued against the narrow ethno-nationalist definition of American culture as synonymous with that of Anglo-Saxon colonists.
early colonial encounters between Spanish colonists. The narratives of history-transcending figures who seek the unconditioned grounds of American experience in attempts to control or master it, to direct history according to their own aims, but end up being coopted into a familiar conflation of “American” history with the history of the United States and an equally familiar story of that history’s culmination and redemption in the sacrifice of Lincoln. As the text goes on, artist-historian figures appear less as history-bestriding colossi or masterful individuals than as effects of a historical process that is beyond their control; and yet, though this process is immanent to history, it is a tainted immanence because it resolves in a teleology: America regained, cleansed by Lincoln’s blood. Though Williams’s more radical immanentism of the earlier chapters gives way to this teleology, the text does not forget these earlier gestures (so to speak), but contains the radical immanence as immanent critique, as the discomfort and dissatisfaction that I argue it primes us to feel toward Williams’s conclusions.

We might think of Williams’s sense of Americanness, however vague it remains, as something similar to what Homi K. Bhabha calls “hybridity”: a shifting process of cultural formation that takes place in the interstitial spaces between the various identities that colonial power fixes into place (25). This hybridity thus “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplies its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (112). Colonial power, for Bhabha, never works in practice as a simple demarcation of fixed identities (colonizer, colonized), but tends instead to diffract into ambivalences, heterogeneities, or hybridities resistant to the identitarian demands of colonial economic and cultural institutions. The “American” quality that Williams invokes in his title, though it is undoubtedly shaped to some degree by American nationalism, is nevertheless a hybridizing force of this kind, a shifting signifier or marker of perpetual instability that weaves
itself, where possible, into a history otherwise co-opted by the self-replicating demands of colonial capitalism. In Williams’s text, these resurgences of difference or hybridity sometimes manifest in specific characters who disrupt the primary categories of colonial identity (European, “Indian”), such as Père Sebastian Rasles, Daniel Boone, Jacataqua, and Sam Houston. To be sure, Williams is no ideal articulator of these particular modes of hybridity, nor do I want to suggest that his perspective tidily anticipates contemporary critiques of colonialism or of the circumstances of European-Indigenous contact. His association of Indigenous peoples with originary wholeness or vitality lapses more than occasionally into a rhetoric of noble savagery and he reduces the Abenaki sachem Jacataqua to a figure of primitive feminine immediacy, similar to the nameless, chthonic “She” who entices De Soto in “De Soto and the New World” (Conrad 132; Holsapple 61-62). My primary interest is not to exonerate Williams of his primitivist prejudices and limitations, but rather to show that what we would now recognize as the limitations of his accounts of America’s colonial past—especially his tendency in the early chapters to abstract real Indigenous presences into echoes, traces, ghosts, or disembodied voices—actually contribute to In the American Grain’s immanent critique of teleological history, inasmuch as it reveals that it is impossible to attain a mastering or unconditioned perspective on history. Insofar as Williams’s treatment of, say, the Caribs and other Indigenous peoples in “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” descends into romanticism, fancy, and fictionalizing, it reveals that the artist-historian cannot speak adequately of the whole of history while at the same time occupying it and participating in its immanence. There is no way, in other words, to narrate history from without when the narrative voice originates from within. It is possible, though, in a Spinozan fashion, to examine the immanent causes of such tensions in Williams’s work as its desire to represent Indigenous peoples in some capacity while being ill-equipped to do so.
Analyzing these causes requires that we interrogate the conditions under which *In the American Grain* was composed.

Examining Williams’s work from this perspective allows us to see its concerns as consonant with those of much post-colonial scholarship, from Bhabha’s essays in *The Location of Culture* to more recent interventions like Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016). This Spinozan immanentist approach to Williams reveals how *In the American Grain* performs—against its own grain, perhaps—something like what Nguyen has called the “ethical work of just memory,” a remembering of the violence of the colonial past that refuses to become merely “a reversal, a mirror, a remembering of one’s own, where the other is good and virtuous and we are bad and flawed,” but “a complex ethics of memory, a just memory that strives both to remember one’s own and others” (12). Nguyen goes on to identify a role for art in this work of just memory: “Art is the artifact of the imagination, and the imagination is perhaps the best manifestation of immortality possessed by the human species, a collective tablet recording both human and inhuman deeds and desires” (12). Williams’s work produces this complex art-memory circuitously by directing us to examine the limitations that its own structure attempts to conceal.

I take my guiding question and title for this section from a line spoken by the narrator of the chapter “The Fountain of Eternal Youth”: “Do these things die? Men who do not know what lives, are themselves dead” (42). Williams’s text is an investigation of the conditions under

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130 On Bhabha’s continued relevance for contemporary postcolonial cultural and literary scholars like Nguyen and others, see Kavita Daiya, “The World After Empire; or, Whither Postcoloniality?”

131 The problem with such narcissistic, self-excoriating accounts of colonial violence from the perspective of colonizers and their descendants, of course, is not that such excoriation is always unwarranted, but that it more often than not displaces analytical attention from the sites of colonial violence, and thus also from those who continue to suffer its most acute consequences and redirects it toward the moral quandaries of “one’s own.”
which the past insists, inheres, and, in short, refuses to die. It thus attempts to gain traction on the past by discovering the structural or immanent causes of the persistence of a given arrangement of pasts, a given régime of historicity. In order for an effect to change, it must be conditioned by other causes, either in addition to or instead of its initial set of causes; a present must activate or be woven into a different assemblage of past moments. This, I argue, is the agency that Williams often appropriates to the artist-historian throughout *In the American Grain*—a capacity to intervene in, reassemble, and reweave the past, as opposed to the power of fixing the present moment in a kind of aesthetically charged stasis that Williams appropriates to the poet in works like *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*. The narrative present, for Williams, is a site where this artist-historian or the narrative voice mounts a counter-narration or re-weaving of the fabric of history; however, *In the American Grain* cannot help but ironize and undercut the privileged position that Williams affords his narrators, whose acts of counter-narration often reaffirm and re-express the erasures and violences of the histories they appear to revise. Thus, in “Red Eric,” Eric the Red narrates his life as a struggle to resist the homogenizing, repetition-imposing force of Christianity, yet, in the structure of Williams’s history, he provides a kind of ur-narrative, and thus a model for repetition, for the later accounts of the conquistadors’ ravaging of the Americas in the name of God. Likewise, the narrator of “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” crafts an account of the colonial conquests of Ponce de León into a revenge tale that figures the enslaved Indigenous groups of Puerto Rico as forces of difference against the repetitious force of Ponce de León, whose proto-capitalist *ethos* of acquisition leads him to reproduce the institutions of Europe in Puerto Rico. The tale seems to grant agency and power to these groups, but in fact repeats a longstanding historical tendency to abstract away the lives of real Indigenous people into a romantic ideal of otherness. Williams’s use of especially fantastic pulp sources for his
research into this chapter encode in the structure of *In the American Grain* a quiet critique of attempts to grant agency to Indigenous peoples without allowing them to speak for themselves. In other words, the logic of immanence returns in Williams’s text as an immanent critique of the text’s own limitations. The same is true of the final chapter, “Abraham Lincoln,” where the celebration of Lincoln as a necessary sacrifice whose death redeems the nation suggests a progressive trajectory and a teleology of American history but reveals itself as an ironic critique of the ideological foundations of the progressive, teleological conceptions of history that both American nationalism and market society encourage. This element emerges if we read the chapter with the knowledge that Williams included this chapter as a concession to his publisher, Charles Boni, who felt it would make the book more marketable (Mariani 246). My reading of *In the American Grain* will focus on these three chapters in order to show that what ultimately emerges at the end of Williams’s curious work is a subtle, if perhaps not wholly conscious, critique (indeed, an autocritique) of artistic pretensions to unconditioned freedom over the fabric of history, informed by the immanentist tradition of Spinoza and Emerson.

“Red Eric,” the chapter that opens *In the American Grain*, introduces us early on to the complicated interplay of the conditioned and the unconditioned, the will to transcendent mastery of history and the ineluctability of structure, which are entangled in the opposition of difference and repetition. At the beginning of the chapter, Eric recounts how he and his father, both observers of the old pagan religion, were driven from Norway after killing a Christian man in self-defence. What galls Eric most about this recollection is the dissonance between the pagan and Christian senses of justice: “Who was this Christ, that he should come to bother me in my own country? His bishops that lie and falsify the records, make me out to be what I am not—for their own ends—because we killed a man” (1). For the Norse Christians, Eric and his father’s act
breaks not only a legal, but also a religious injunction against murder. From the perspective of law, this introduces an intolerable and destabilizing force of difference that requires Eric’s and his father’s expulsion, since their very presence, if unpunished, would represent the failure of the law to function consistently. The hegemony of the Christian moral order in Norway depends on the consistent enforcement of this law and on ensuring that every instance of legal judgment is, in a sense, repetitious, reiterative of the same set of legal principles. An act of violence committed under the aegis of a different set of principles, then, such as those of the earlier pagan system of belief, would be intolerable. Furthermore, Eric’s revelling in violence and disdain for the soft, pacific values of the Christians suggests that his worldview is one in which individual mastery and prowess are the truest goods. This fact is especially pertinent since Eric is the first narrator we encounter—he cannot help but appear to us as the voice of history itself, the very paradigm of the artist-historian asserting a transcendent, mastering power of intervening in the structure of history. For Eric, this intervention is a history from the perspective of the defeated, of the paganism that will never again dominate Norse society. By beginning his version of American history with Eric, Williams constructs a counter-history to the “standard” narrative of an America delivered unto the Puritans by divine ordainment. In writing his account this way, Williams emphasizes the willful, ethnocentric violence by which post-contact American history developed. This counter-history is akin to what Nguyen refers to as the mere “reversal” of the memory of past violence, switching the polarity of valorization away from the alleged moralism, conformism, and teleology of the Puritans toward the amoral, differential, self-willed or masterful pagans; however, as I suggest above, it is precisely in attempting this reversal that Williams actually performs a more complex and, I argue, Spinozan account of history that more closely resembles Nguyen’s “complex ethics of memory.”
When Eric actually attempts to assert himself against the apparent trajectory of history, though, the structure of the text suggests that his mastering enterprise fails to condition history and instead serves the tendencies he resists. Both at the level of the chapter’s internal structure and at the level of the chapter’s place within the broader structure of the text, *In the American Grain* undercuts Eric’s pretensions to difference and to a masterful transcendence of the historical conditions he encounters. As the self-conscious inheritor of a pagan legacy that is rapidly vanishing from the world, Eric must represent a repetitious force as well as a differential one. He expresses what Nietzsche might recognize as that pagan legacy’s will to power: not merely its striving to persist and affirm itself in the weave of history (as in Spinoza’s *conatus*), but to master the conditions that limit it. More consequentially, though, Eric is an unwitting participant in the expansion and replication of the Christian moral order that he so vehemently opposes. It is this moral order, which marks Eric as sinful (a category that is incoherent in his moral universe), that drives him westward, first from Norway to Iceland, then from Iceland to Greenland. Here, he tells us that he “must open a way for [the Christians] into the ice that they follow me here—their servant, in spite of myself. Yet they must follow” (1). In other words, Eric recognizes that, even in escape, he has been followed by Christians. Forced to concede this limitation, that he cannot, in the end, choose his followers, Eric contents himself with his mastery over these weak-hearted subjects, with opening up the frontier that they will settle. Even if he cannot erase the Christian scourge from the past or present, he contents himself with the illusion that he can weave its future. “In Greenland,” he recalls, “I had begun to feel that I had left the curse [of Christianity] behind” (3). Williams underscores Eric’s feeling of isolated safety and control in order to ironize it. One of Eric’s motives for settling Greenland is to preserve the social order in which the will of strong individuals creates the law, rather than the Christian order.
in which law shields the weak from the mastering will of the strong; however, this illusion is punctured by the news that Eric’s son, Lief the Lucky, the “discoverer” of Vinland and the first European to land in the Americas, has been converted to Christianity by King Olaf I of Norway and instructed him “to carry the thing back to Greenland,” where it “grows like fire” (4).

After Lief’s return, all of Eric’s kin, with the exception of his daughter Freydis, convert, effectively dashing his hopes of continuing his struggle against the Christians through his sons. It was only through his family that Eric could extend his defiance beyond his own life and enact a sort of counter-narration or reweaving of history. The conversion of his family makes this counter-narration impossible and confronts Eric with the impossibility of attaining any kind of unconditioned mastery over history. When Lief assembles a group of settlers to colonize Vinland, as his father once colonized Greenland, an aging Eric declines to go with them. Though Vinland is at an even greater remove from Christian Europe than Greenland, Eric realizes that there is no longer any outside. He does not travel with his son, going so far as to disown him (at least rhetorically), but nevertheless feels that “Eric is in the ship, with the men, Eric the bedless, the sonless” (4). He now identifies closely with Freydis and imagines that his legacy will extend through her, rather than the Christian sons. Because Eric cannot possibly have witnessed the events of the Vinland voyage, we become aware that his narration must be, in part, fantastical, transcendent. His attachment to these events is intimate, emotional, lived, yet he is not present to them and in fact dies in Greenland at some point during the voyage. Eric’s position in the text

There have been many theories about the historical location of Vinland, with some sources placing it in Massachusetts and others in the Atlantic provinces of Canada. Since the 1970s, the most widely accepted theory has placed it near the town of L’Anse aux Meadows on the northern coast of Newfoundland, Canada. Williams does not suggest a particular location in “Red Eric.”
thus repeats the impossible position of the artist-historian who would be both present to history and removed from it, suffused by it and yet fictively impervious to its conditions.

The structure of the “Red Eric” chapter forces us to consider the limitations and, in a sense, the absurdity, of Eric’s ambitions, particularly in the dramatic irony that emerges over the first half of *In the American Grain*, as it becomes clear that Williams intends us to read Eric’s colonial venture in Greenland and Lief’s in Vinland as typological prefigurations of the conquistadors’ bloody conquest of the Indigenous peoples who precede them in America. Not only does Eric suffer the shame of knowing that his son will voyage to Vinland as a Christian, an apostate turned against his own family, but we are encouraged, as readers, to see Eric’s flight as the very model of the Christianizing and conquering missions that follow in later centuries. It is precisely what Eric sought to escape and to counter, in other words, that he unwittingly spreads. This fact appears in a somewhat deeper irony through Eric’s reflections on Freydis, who joins Lief on the Vinland expedition. Freydis so fully embodies the aggressive vitality and vigour of the old ideals, outfighting even her brother when their party skirmishes with the “Skrellings” in Vinland, that Eric identifies her prowess with his own (“Eric in Freydis’ bones”). Later, though Eric initially speaks admiringly of the violence Freydis arranges to be committed against the brothers Finnbogi and Helgi, he recognizes that her violence is too extreme, too socially volatile, even for him to admire, particularly when he recounts her willingness to kill even the women of the brothers’ household (5-6). In the final passages of the chapter, he laments that Lief “has no heart to punish his sister as she deserves” and predicts a barren future for his lineage (6). Lief, too weak to practice the necessary justice, or rather to construct justice by countering his

133 The Norse called the Indigenous peoples of Vinland “Skraelings” (or “Skrellings,” as Williams renders it). If Lief, the gentler of Eric’s children, prefigures the colonizing ethos of the conquistadors, the warlike Freydis more specifically prefigures their violence and brutality.
sister’s violence with his own, fails to live up to the model that Eric would like him to repeat and emblazon on history; so too does Freydis, albeit for different reasons. Freydis is the limit case of Eric’s own violence. She manifests too volatile a force of difference, such that Eric recognizes, ironically, that his daughter must be limited as he and his father had been limited by punishment for their transgressions in Iceland and Norway. In other words, Eric ends up in a similar structural position relative to his kin as the Christians were relative to him. Even while narrating from his own afterlife, Eric cannot impose a narrative of simple, consistent opposition between himself and the Christian order he fled. He cannot stand outside of the historical structure that he claims to elucidate; he cannot represent difference itself, but only a difference that is always tangled with repetition, a historical purview that is always tripped up in the complex weave of history’s causes and effects. Put another way, under no conditions can he make his way to a life with no conditions.

Though Williams portrays Eric’s ambition as being, in a sense, to produce an alternative telos for history (and thus to divert history from a course that we, as readers after the fact, recognize as already determined), the “Red Eric” chapter seems only to reaffirm the inevitability of Christian hegemony, the colonization of America, and the conquest of its Indigenous peoples. And yet, like the apparent teleology of capitalist progress in Wilder’s Our Town, the teleology of “Red Eric” is not absolute or an essential function of history. There is no alternative in this chapter to teleological history, to the sense of inevitable progress toward Christianity, in large part because Eric himself is incapable of sustaining such an alternative. He revolts against the Christian order in a dialectical fashion, presenting himself as its antithesis. In this oppositional scheme, the sense of Eric’s revolt can only be defined with direct reference to the historical formation against which he revolts. Eric fails to reweave his history not because such a
reweaving is impossible but because, in assuming the role of artist-historian, he fails to recognize until it is too late that he is always trapped within history. In this way, Williams’s ironic treatment of Eric suggests that an artist-historian who writes from within history, rather than claiming to master it from without, might be able to weave a different history. And yet, the structure of Williams’s text, as it moves into its conquistador chapters, appears to reinforce the teleological sense of history as an inevitable universalization first of Christianity and eventually of capitalism. It will remain for Williams to disrupt this apparent teleology in later chapters; early in his history, though, in chapters like “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan” and “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” the conquistadors Cortez and Ponce de León seem to perform a synthesis of Christian progressiveness and Eric the Red’s rugged brutality that finds an apparently inevitable expression in the colonial enterprise. Though Eric plays only a brief part in Williams’s text, we can imagine his voice as an expansive ripple through time, speaking not only in its own voice, but also in that of Ponce de León and others who inherit Eric’s violent disposition and place it in the service of Christianity and a nascent world capitalism. We need only look to the figure that Nietzsche in the Genealogy of Morals infamously calls “the blond beast” to see Williams’s Hernán Cortez or Ponce de León:

[M]en who are held so sternly in check inter pares by custom, respect, usage, gratitude […] [but who], once they go outside, where the strange, the stranger is found […] are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. There they savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in the wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society. (476, emphasis in the original)
What the conquistadors absorb from Eric the Red, master of Greenland, Williams implies, is this willful viciousness, a desire to master “the strange, the stranger,” the same desire that leads the deceased Eric to imagine himself present on the Vinland expedition, “driven westward upon [the] new country” (3) his son has discovered in order to seize with his progeny “the good things that there might be obtained” (5). It is this desire, in fact, that provides the central thematic for Williams’s curious account of Ponce de León in “The Fountain of Eternal Youth.”

Though in many ways “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” is the story of Ponce de León’s career, from his conquest and reign over Puerto Rico to his exploration of the Florida coast, it is also a story of vengeance, ending as it does with the conquistador’s violent death at the hands of Yamasee warriors in Florida during one last campaign, having exhausted his middle years in a fruitless search for the Fountain of Youth. It is a story permeated by violence, and, as in “Red Eric,” the narrative unfolds around a dynamic of difference and repetition. In the exclamation that opens the chapter, Williams’s narrator diagnoses this violence as a fundamental component of American history and acknowledges a certain contemporary debt to such Indigenous peoples as the Caribs: "History, history! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery. No, we are not Indians, but we are men of their world" (39). The narrator rejects the myth of the European arrival as a benign or fruitful discovery of difference, of a “new” world, and points instead to the violence and bloodshed of the Europeans’ conquest of the Indigenous peoples they encountered; however, equally important here is an implicit erasure of “Indians” from the historical present. Though Williams (or his narrator, who appears to speak from the same time and place) includes himself along with all other contemporary Americans in this broad “we” whose history is only of violence and ignorance, he implicitly excludes “Indians” from this group—and yet, it is precisely these
“Indians” whom the narrator presumes to speak for and to empower in his narrative. Though Indigenous peoples in the United States had attained citizenship only a year prior to the publication of *In the American Grain*, with the ratification of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, Williams here seems not only to exclude the Caribs and others from the category of Americans (in the relatively expansive sense that he understands it early in the text), but writes as though they remain only as a memorial trace in “their world,” which European settlers inherit. Though the narrator challenges the popular myth of the European landing as a genuine discovery of the new, rather than as contact with civilizations that were already established, he implicitly elects himself as the agent who will articulate an Indigenous resistance to Ponce de León and his will to make of the “new” world a simulacrum of Europe. In short, although the narrator discovers a power of anti-colonial resistance in the submission of the Indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico to Ponce de León, this power manifests itself only in the narrator’s voice, not in the voice of the peoples affected; for all intents and purposes, they are either abstracted away or romanticized into representatives of a kind of pure, inalienable difference.

Before turning to the autocritique that constitutes the real dynamic historicism of “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” I will briefly examine the oppositions (difference and repetition, Indigenous and European) that structure the chapter. Though the text gives us the tools for complicating and challenging the flaws in this more surface-level reading, we must understand what Williams suggests through these oppositions before any such reading will be legible. Williams enters Ponce de León’s story *in medias res*: the conquistador has exhausted the supply of slaves on Puerto Rico, where his plantations, outposts of European social organization in the New World, have made him wealthy. In order to satisfy his voracious demand for labour, Ponce de León receives a patent from the Spanish crown authorizing him to enslave the Caribs who
inhabit the nearby islands. Williams portrays a Ponce de León who sees Indigenous peoples only as a commodity, as supply to a demand, so that each is no more to him than an identical repetition of the one before. From the point of view of Europe and the plantation economy, the Caribs and others are only repetitions of an identical quantity of labour, so many means to the same end. However, Williams portrays the Caribs themselves in persistently differential terms. The narrator describes them as the ones "whom The Great Maker had dropped through a hole in the sky among their islands; they whose souls lived in their bodies, many souls in one body" (39). The question of the soul illustrates most clearly the distinctions between Ponce de León and those he dominates. Where the Caribs see themselves as already multi-souled and thus self-differential, as multitudinous subjects, not identities, Ponce de León and the other planters cannot see the natives even as being alive; rather, they are soulless, lacking in the basic component of Christian identity. While Ponce de León's notion of what is valuable begins with the repetition-of-the-same (insofar as the Christian soul finds its principle and model in the static, eternal image of God), the Caribs', Williams suggests, begins with difference, the manifold and plural nature of souls. The most dramatic way that Williams figures the persistence of this difference in "The Fountain of Eternal Youth" is in the chain of events leading up to Ponce de León's death. By the beginning of the chapter’s narrative, Ponce de León, already governor of Puerto Rico, has exterminated many of the island’s natives and absorbed the remainder into an economic structure that reproduces the proto-industrial agricultural methods and organization of Europe. “He became a planter,” the narrator observes; “Sugar cane was imported from the Canaries, maize was adapted from the Indian souls” (41). This reference to maize and the Caribs’ souls is

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134 The accuracy of this account of Carib religion is unclear, as Williams’s source, as I discuss shortly, was not a scholarly history or a primary source, but a sensationalized, and largely apocryphal, biography of Ponce de León written for a broad audience (Conrad 84).
conspicuous, since it follows shortly after the narrator questions the conquistadors’ assumption that “Indians have no souls.” The maize itself appears as a symbol for the narrator of the Caribs’ understanding of their own souls. Just as the Caribs are singular but possessed of many souls, a single ear of maize is many-seeded; like the maize, the Caribs become mere commodities in an economy that cultivates them for the express purpose of grinding them down or consuming them. The integration of Indigenous staple crops such as maize into a European economy organized around the production of surpluses for a developing world market is analogous to Ponce de León’s efforts either to integrate or annihilate the Caribs, to extinguish their difference either by reducing them to commodities (slave labour) or by securing their fealty.

Later in the chapter, Ponce de León performs a ceremony of exchanging names with one of the chieftains on Puerto Rico. This ceremony initially appears as a differential repetition, in the sense that one who takes on another's name also takes on a certain responsibility for, and obligation toward, the other partner in the exchange. But Ponce de León sees the exchange only as a means to an end, a way to secure dominance, and eventually allows the chieftain to be hanged. The passage marks the beginning of the chapter’s vengeance narrative, the resurgence of the difference that Ponce de León represses. By allowing the chieftain who now possesses the name "Ponce de León" to be killed and in profaning the ceremony by killing the one who bears his own name, Ponce de León earns the hatred of the natives he has dominated. In the long run, the conquistador’s eventual death in Florida appears, in Williams’s telling, as vindication for his injustices against the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. When an “old Indian woman” of an unspecified tribe tells Ponce de León about "a fountain of clearest water of virtue to make old men young" (42), we are primed to read his desire for eternal youth as the logical end of his repetition mania, a final inoculation from all change, including the passage of time itself. Even
the story of the Fountain of Youth is a repetition of an ancient Eurasian myth, having no
demonstrable origins among any of the Indigenous peoples that the Spanish encountered in the
Americas, though Williams was likely unaware of this fact (Peck 64). In his telling, Ponce de
León, “the destroyer of beauty,” becomes obsessed with the nominally Indigenous tale, only for
its promise of eternal life to represent, in the end, “the real, the thing destroyed turning back with
a smile,” the final vengeance of the Indigenous peoples against their conqueror (43).

And yet, the Fountain also represents more than Ponce de León’s desire for fame or
everlasting life. In granting these things to him, it would elevate him into a mastering position
over history. He would transcend history with his own static eternity, ascending beyond the
conditions and limits of time and individual life, while retaining power over all of these things—
he would, in short, take on the artist-historian role that Williams’s narrator sometimes performs.
In this sense, we begin to see how In the American Grain pushes us to question the very nature
of Williams’s portrayal of Ponce de León’s story. Just as the “Red Eric” chapter’s schematic
opposition between Eric and the Christians hides a more complicated autocritique of the
limitations of narrative as a means of mastering history, “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” is a
more interesting text if we view its surface action skeptically. I argue that the chapter can be read
as a critique of its own conditions of composition and limitations as a piece of history and, most
significantly, of the authority that Williams’s narrator cannot help but claim. In his seminal study
of In the American Grain, Bryce Conrad wonders why Williams felt compelled to include a
chapter on Ponce de León in the first place, considering that “[w]ith Columbus, Cortez, and De
Soto, Williams had a substantial body of historical source texts with which to work. With Ponce,
he had none” (83). While Williams consulted serious historiography and (where possible)
primary sources for his other chapters, his main source for the narrative of Ponce de León’s
governorship over Puerto Rico and his quest for the Fountain of Youth was an amateur biography by the naturalist Frederick A. Ober (*Juan Ponce de Leon*) that Conrad calls “little more than a juvenile adventure story with a historical setting” (83). Furthermore, Williams’s “choice of such a puerile fiction is entirely at odds with his preference for using original documents as the textual basis” of his history (Conrad 83-84). And yet, the chapter deals with a place of special importance to Williams, whose mother was Puerto Rican. He would have been acutely aware of at least some of the limitations of Ober’s pulpy, heavily fictionalized biography. It is therefore possible to see “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” as an exploration of the seductive, potentially destructive quality of mythic and historical narratives.

The concluding passages of the chapter also indicate the awkwardness and superficiality of Williams’s conscious attempts to articulate something like the immanence of history in the present, which fail to escape the transcendence that his narrator embodies. In other words, just as Williams’s text cannot transcend the immanence of history, its investment in this attempted transcendence limits the extent to which it can adequately portray historical immanence. At the end of the chapter, Ponce de León is drawn from retirement—and to his death in a Yamasee ambush—by the lure of fame and fortune in Florida, the acquisition of which might secure him a place in history, another kind of everlasting life. Williams underscores the connection in Ponce de León’s mind between the “old Indian” woman’s tale of the Fountain and the fame that he might win in Florida by quipping that the Yamasees “let out [the] fountain” of his blood (44).

The narrator points beyond the immediate vengeance represented by Ponce de León’s death toward a long-term, historical vengeance: “Fierce and implacable we [colonial settlers] kill them but their souls dominate us” (40). Though the Spanish slaughter the Indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, these peoples inhere in the colonial culture that emerges on Puerto Rico; they do not
die but live on as an immanent presence. One might expect Williams to find this immanence in a kind of cultural synthesis of European and Indigenous peoples, achieved through generations of colonial cohabitation and intermarriage; however, what we find instead is an awkward presence without voice: “We are, too, the others,” the narrator declares (41). The narrator ascribes this alterity to himself, effectively authorizing himself to deliver a history-transcending account that speaks for both sides of the colonial encounter while shrugging off its own situatedness. It is as though the Indigenous peoples live on only through the narrator and the “we” that he invokes, though this portrayal more or less removes them from history altogether, making them into a perpetual presence that can never quite be made present. Williams abstracts them into a vague, idealized alterity embodied only in the transcendent figure of the artist-historian, the narrator. Thus, Williams’s steps toward portraying the immanence of history in the present stumble into transcendence. Though these Indigenous groups do not die, neither do they really live except in a strange middle existence that can neither be expunged nor absorbed into history.

While this aspect of the text might rightly be judged a failing, the text also points toward its own critique. Though the colonial inheritance of the Caribbean natives speaks to a certain limited logic of immanence, the dynamic historicist content of the chapter really resides in its capacity to critique the limits and illusions of this more superficial, idealizing immanentism by which Indigenous peoples linger ghost-like over the present. If we look to the chapter’s structure, we can discern a rough analogy between Ponce de León and Williams that complicates this idealizing counter-narration. In Williams’s retelling of Ober’s biography, Ponce de León dies searching for the impossible—a release from one of the basic conditions of human life (the exposure to death). This fiction proves fatal to his ambitions. It is fiction, too, in a sense, that hobbles Williams’s project of counter-narrating American history in a way that grants agency
and power to conquered Indigenous peoples. *In the American Grain* falters in its reliance on the transcendent power of narrative itself, on a narrator whose means of granting agency to the conquered Indigenous peoples unwittingly erases and abstracts them, and renders these real people, with real descendants, into convenient symbols of wild novelty or immediacy (not real people, but “the real,” the ineffable other). Just as Ponce de León seeks an impossible escape from the conditions of life, Williams, via his narrator, attempts an impossible escape from his own position in the structure of history as a white man, echoing the largely fictional words of another white man, speaking on behalf of a people about whom he knows too little to speak, whose voices he cannot adequately represent. These limitations intrude on Williams’s text at key moments and lead him, ironically, to perform the very erasure of Indigenous peoples that his narration wants to resist. For example, Williams names the Yamasees as the tribe whose warriors kill Ponce de León on his last campaign in Florida. The confusion likely arises from Williams’s misreading of Ober, who names the Yamasees as one of the tribes inhabiting Florida but speaks only of “Indians” in his account of Ponce de León’s death (Ober, “Florida and Bimini and Juan Ponce’s Last Campaign”). Those responsible for driving off Ponce de León’s party and killing the conquistador were in fact the Calusa (Turner 29). More seriously than this slip of reference is the fact that Williams unwittingly subsumes this piece of the Calusa’s history into that of their enemies, the Yamasees, whose raids contributed to the displacement and eventual destruction of the Calusa several generations after Ponce de León’s fatal encounter in Florida (MacMahon and Marquardt 82-87). Similarly, though Williams mentions the Caribs by name, he follows Ober in subsuming the Caribs’ rivals on Puerto Rico, the Taínos, into the general category of “Indians,” thus suggesting that their history is more or less interchangeable with that of any other “Indian” group; in Williams’s portrayal, this abstraction is the general Indigenous mass from which the
Caribs, by virtue of their ferocity and cannibalism, can be distinguished (In the American Grain 40; Ober, “Subjugation of Boriquen”). But even this distinction can be troublesome since Williams sometimes generalizes where Ober specifies. For instance, Ober sometimes refers to the Taínos as “Boriquenos,” from “Boriquen,” their name for what the Spanish called Puerto Rico, rather than as “Indians” (Ober, “Subjugation of Boriquen”). It is uncertain, in other words, when Williams means “Indian” to refer to the Taínos and when he means it to refer to the Caribs.

The problem of representation is also acute in the context of Williams’s emulation of “the romantic excesses of Ober’s style” (Conrad 84). Whatever his sympathies with the Caribs or his misgivings for the violence of the Spanish colonial project, Williams’s repetition of Ober’s sensational, bestializing account of the Carib attack on the Spanish beachhead at Guadeloupe only reinforces his tendency to paint Indigenous peoples as radically other. Williams’s account lightly paraphrases Ober, preserving his account of the Caribs as beast-like cannibals: “The Indians have grabbed up the [Spanish] women. Three naked savages shot through the chest from behind before they could gain the forest rolled over and gripped the females they had been carrying by the throat with their teeth” (In the American Grain 40; Ober, “Encounters with Cannibals”). “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” cannot help but express Williams’s status as a non-Indigenous writer speaking on behalf of Indigenous subjects from a position of relative ignorance, largely informed by a sensationalized and broadly apocryphal account of Ponce de León’s life. Williams, by modeling his chapter’s narrative on such a patently unreliable source, seems both to comprehend and reproduce these limitations, pushing the reader to examine the causal structure of his account (Williams’s position in his society, his sources, his history’s conditions of composition). In other words, Williams’s history foregrounds its own immanent cause and encourages us not only to take a critical view of the text’s internal workings, but to
reflect on the ways that those workings are conditioned by the historical moment in which the text itself resides.

There remains the problem of articulating what *In the American Grain* says about teleological or progressive accounts of history. Chapters like “Red Eric” seem to imply a railroaded conception of history as the inevitable expansion of Christian, European, or proto-capitalist ideals. In a certain light, “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” continues that notion by showing the conquistadors, the colonial project, and the assertion of European dominance in the Americas as the fulfilment of a process that “Red Eric” dramatized with Lief’s conversion to Christianity and expedition to Vinland. In what remains of this chapter, I want to suggest that *In the American Grain* does not endorse this sense of inevitable progress toward a given historical telos, despite the lack of any explicit rejection of this perspective. Rather, Williams embeds an ironic critique of the progressive historical imagination in the structure of his final chapter, the page-long character sketch “Abraham Lincoln,” while at the same time suggesting that Lincoln represents an alternative to the pretensions of transcendent mastery over history that Williams has critiqued in characters like Eric the Red and Ponce de León.

Williams’s portrait of Lincoln is at once conventional and striking. His choice to conclude a history of America’s formative influences with the figure of Lincoln is a predictable one and plays off of a romanticizing tendency to read Lincoln’s presidency as the beginning of the modern United States and its ascendancy as a world power. Integral to this narrative is a sense of the Union’s victory over the Confederacy and Lincoln’s emancipation of the slaves as the first serious redress of America’s original sins, of which colonization and slavery are the foremost examples. In the final words of *In the American Grain*, Williams suggests that Lincoln’s death marks both the culmination and the end of a great period of violence and conflict.
in America, but also figures him, interestingly, as a maternal figure: “The age-old torture reached a climax in Lincoln [...] the place tormented itself into a convulsion of bewilderment—with a woman, born somehow, aching over it, holding all fearfully together. It was the end of THAT period” (234). Williams begins the chapter by referring to Lincoln as “The Great Railsplitter,” thus evoking the mythology that surrounded him and in which he appeared less as a living figure than a prophet, the towering frontiersman who gave flesh to the ideal of the self-made man and whose rise from poverty to power seemed neatly to match the ascent of the United States itself.

In Williams’s time, this account of Lincoln would have been familiar from a series of popular articles and books by the journalist Ida Tarbell, particularly her two-volume collection *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1900), which remained popular well into the 1920s (Rice 65). Judith A. Rice credits Tarbell in particular with facilitating a shift in public opinion about Lincoln’s humble origins on the western frontier, correcting a notable tendency in earlier histories to treat his lowly frontier origins with condescension or distaste (62-63). Through these histories and her pair of fictional accounts aimed at young readers, *He Knew Lincoln* and *Father Abraham*, Tarbell helped to fashion the president into an aspirational ideal for the era of progressive social reform—a Lincoln who was paternal but compassionate, rough but dignified, gregarious but serious, and who represented a time when “a sense of fair play had formed the rules of the game and won the day” (Rice 66, 68-72). More than this, though, she also saw in the figure of the president a model of the “strong executive leadership” that Tarbell and other Progressive Era reformers saw as necessary to protect the public from the powers of entrenched interests (Rice 67-68). If we look to *In the American Grain*, though, we do not find Tarbell’s rugged father of

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135 The relatively non-specific language here suggests that the wounds that Lincoln (allegedly) heals are not restricted to those of slavery, but perhaps also of colonization, which supplies the content of the first half of *In the American Grain*. 
the nation, the decisive Lincoln who believed unshakably in the upward path of progress toward enlightenment, improvement, and rationality, but something quite different—not Father Abraham, but Mother Lincoln. Williams’s sketch jumps directly from the image of Lincoln as the hardy railsplitter to his admiration for his mother and proceeds to frame the president increasingly in female and maternal terms, ultimately portraying him during the Civil War as a mother to Union soldiers, “a woman in an old shawl—with a great bearded face and a towering black hat above it, to give it an unearthly reality” (234).

But what is really at issue in Williams’s re-gendering of Lincoln? The point of contest here is the nature of the authority over history we ascribe to historical agents. In contrast to Tarbell, who emphasizes Lincoln’s strength and grandeur of vision, his transcendence of the average or ordinary, Williams emphasizes his intimacy with others, his democratic accessibility, his willingness to meet the conditions and circumstances of his existence at their own level, as part of them, to meet even “the least private” on equal terms. If Eric the Red represented the artist-historian or the historical agent who looks to escape the conditions of history in order to master them, Lincoln is his opposite, an agent who manifests a paradoxically “unearthly reality”—unearthly in a similar sense as Emerson’s “above time,” that is, occupying a position of power over its surroundings yet partaking wholly of them and of a common reality. Williams next casts Lincoln in the guise of the conductor Willem Mengelberg, organizing—not mastering or transcending—the “overtowering symphony,” the whole ensemble of the United States, from which Lincoln is no more separable than the conductor from the orchestra. If Lincoln’s famous stove pipe hat is “towering,” the orchestra’s collective activity overtowers even its conductor, undercutting the suggestion of transcendence that the hat initially imparts. Williams now eroticizes Lincoln, suggesting that his conduction of the orchestra might be read as a quasi-
sexual union, and portrays the president as “a woman drawing to herself with insatiable passion
the myriad points of sound, conferring upon each the dignity of a successful approach, relieving
each of his swelling burden” (234). He suggests that Lincoln possesses a seductive magnetism
(the “insatiable passion” that attracts the multitude) that promises an implicitly sexual release (a
relief of the multitude’s “swelling burden”) that presages the birth of a new era of American
history. By concluding *In the American Grain* with this maternal Lincoln, Williams invites us to
compare him with the first character we encounter in the text, the violent patriarch Eric the Red,
who would seize and pull the rein of history back toward a pagan past if at all possible. Though
he is perhaps unaware of having done so, Williams also offers, through Lincoln, a way of
confounding Santayana’s dichotomy between the effete, genteel tradition of Emerson and the
aggressive, masculine tradition symbolized by the skyscraper. Here, the explicit femininity of
Lincoln is not effete, passive, or complacent, but Lincoln is one who strives and struggles with
the difficult political work of compassion. This compassion is not a platitudinous sympathy
based on abstract moral principles, but the bearing in common of the uncertain and exhausting
burden of weaving together a more livable history from blood-stained strands. If Williams could
not quite endorse Emerson outright, his Lincoln nevertheless enacts something Emersonian and,
I argue, Spinozan, some straining against the easy dichotomy of the genteel and the aggressive,
the masterful and the teleological. *In the American Grain* articulates, through its maternal
Lincoln, an alternative mode of historical authority that has no ambitions of unconditional power
over this woven history. Lincoln’s is not a will to mastery, but only to persistence, a will to
continue “aching over” a history that one cannot simply remake, of “holding […] fearfully
together” a mass of things that did not die, that do not die, that will not die, but which likewise
persist. Against Eric’s Nietzschean will to power, there is Lincoln’s Spinozan *conatus*—a striving to persist in history, to weather it, to discover how best to inhabit it (234).\(^{136}\)

Finally, what of the critique of the progressive historical imagination embedded in the structure of this final chapter? By structuring his work to end with an account of Lincoln that challenges the mastering, transcendent attitude of the likes of Eric the Red and Ponce de León toward their historical conditions, Williams seems to suggest a genuine improvement or progress over time—a movement beyond the “age-old torture” of violent impulses that make up the underlying structure of early American history (234). This conclusion also suggests that *In the American Grain* can be read as a history that terminates in the *telos* of the period that Lincoln conceives and births, whether that means the Progressive Era, post-bellum modernity, or some other periodic construction. Lincoln fits so naturally into this pivotal position in the narrative of historical progress—and yet, when Williams submitted the manuscript of *In the American Grain* to his publisher Charles Boni, this chapter did not exist. As Paul Mariani tells it, “Boni liked the book, [but] asked Williams to add a Lincoln piece, and then the book would go to press. Williams agreed by pounding out a one-page impression of the Great Emancipator […] and the book was finished” (246). By this account, the Lincoln chapter is not the thematic capstone of a progressive history, as it might appear, but a last-minute rush job that Williams was compelled to write in order to secure publication.

\(^{136}\) We should be careful, though, of reading Williams’s treatment of Lincoln as unambiguously feminist. As always, Williams’s treatment of the conventional categories of the masculine and feminine is deeply ambiguous. For instance, it strikes me as significant for Williams that Lincoln is not a woman, but a man with stereotypically female and maternal qualities. In this respect, he is the mirror of Eric the Red’s daughter Freydis, a woman who embodies stereotypically masculine qualities (aggression, dominance, violence). Williams seems much more laudatory of the masculine type with female qualities (Lincoln) than he does of the female type with masculine qualities (Freydis). While Lincoln heals—or at least soothes—the tremendous wounds of post-bellum America and makes possible its rejuvenation, Freydis destroys and embodies a kind of irrepressible, chaotic violence.
It is difficult to say with any precision why Boni insisted on Williams ending his book with a nod to Lincoln, but we can speculate more broadly about why a publisher, whose interest is in securing as wide an audience as possible, would do so. Lincoln remained a figure of popular fascination throughout the 1920s, particularly in the form that Tarbell helped to disseminate—Tarbell’s *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* received new editions in 1920, 1924, and 1928. While Tarbell had marshaled him as an ideal of moral leadership in the face of the corruption and inefficacy of Gilded Age politics, Lincoln would have appeared, in the “Roaring Twenties,” as one of the founding fathers of this newly wealthy, confident America. In short, Boni would likely have recognized that Lincoln was a highly marketable figure who could perhaps attract a larger audience to Williams’s work. But what does it mean that this chapter did not emerge organically, but in response to the imperative of pleasing a publisher? Throughout *In the American Grain*, history appears as progress, amelioration, and improvement, as the passage toward a more perfect end-state or *telos*, only in a limited sense. As we see from Lief’s battles with the Skraelings in Vinland to Ponce de León’s insatiable conquest and enslavement of the Indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Guadeloupe, and Florida, the expansion of Christianity and the development of the profit-seeking, surplus-hungry *ethos* of capitalism involves no reduction in violence, no progress of peace or enlightenment; on the contrary, they are perpetrated and perpetuated by a violence that inheres throughout the history that follows. Though Williams appears to endorse a progressive account of history in which everything leads toward the redemptive sacrifice of Lincoln, this ceases to be the case when we recognize that the chapter exists in the first place as an effect of a certain transcendent, mastering power of Boni over Williams, or, rather, of the diffuse relations and exigencies of the market over the text. These externalities impose themselves on *In the American Grain* as necessary conditions or limitations.
Forces such as these structure how Williams, the artist-historian, can express his view of history in his work, even if they do not structure what exactly he can say. It is fitting, then, that Williams’s subversive re-gendering of Lincoln to suggest a conative or Spinozan alternative to the Eric’s and Ponce de León’s Nietzschean will to power is neither the inevitable product of a teleological history, nor the willful intervention of a sovereign artist-historian, but rather enacts a dynamic, immanentist model of history. Williams cannot narrate his way out of this bind and the work cannot help but contain the immanent traces of the externalities that shape it. There is no narrative escape from the conditionality of history, but this fact does not stop Williams’s narrative from revealing that even what appears unconditional and inherent is a conditional narrative, bound as much as Williams himself to the fact that the structure of history lives on in its effects—that “these things” do not die.

Though the visions of eternity or history that Wilder and Williams develop are sharply divergent in many ways, they share a sense that time must be thought not only as a constant flow, a multiplicity, or a plurality of moments, but also as an intrinsically relational mode of experience that produces a structure that remains immanent to it as its relations unfold. Moreover, both modernists understand that this structure, though it is composed of nothing but time itself, produces effects in the times that it structures. Taken collectively, time is a cause of its own structure, but its particular, individuated strands are also effects of—or affected by—this structuring. In this regard, Wilder and Williams both participate, knowingly or otherwise, in a Spinozan strain of American literature that develops and redeployes the logic of immanent causation that Emerson articulates in his essays and in his preface for *The Dial*. In the modernist period, this immanentist, monistic approach becomes a tool for thinking about the structure of time without resorting to the ideas of timelessness, teleology, or progress.
CHAPTER 3: "SPEEDS AND SLOWNESSES":

MACHINIC MO(DER)NISM AND THE BLUR OF SPEED

"How does Spinoza define a body? In the first place, a body, however small it may be, is composed of an infinite number of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles, that define a body, the individuality of a body." – Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*¹³⁷

"Soon the only thing left will be for us to forget the specious distinction between the propagation of images or waves and that of objects or bodies, since from now on all duration will be measured in intensity." – Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*¹³⁸

I. Modernist Speed, Blur, and Space-Time

I begin with a word that required making, a word as ugly as it is efficient and one that will function as the engine of the discussion to come: "mo(der)nism." It is a word assembled, like a small machine, from a set of disparate parts.¹³⁹ Like a machine, it produces a modicum of speed, a convenience, an efficiency. From two discrete, autonomous inputs—the concepts "monism" and "modernism"—the word-machine produces their relation, no longer one or the other, but necessarily both. Also embedded in this sense of the "modern" is a word that lies at the root of the monistic philosophy of Baruch Spinoza: "mode," or the finite manifestation of the

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¹³⁷ Deleuze 123.
¹³⁸ Virilio 84.
¹³⁹ In his introduction to his 1944 volume *The Wedge*, William Carlos Williams makes a characteristically brusque pronouncement: "Let the metaphysical take care of itself, the arts have nothing to do with it. They will concern themselves with it if they please, among other things. To make two bald statements: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words" (*The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. 2: 1939-1962* 54). Pace Williams, one of the recurring themes of my chapter will be the instability of this supposed fissure between the machine and the metaphysical. Insofar as the machine or the poem works—insofar as it produces speed—it reveals a sliding back and forth of parts from relative discreteness to blurred, indiscinate singularity. This relationship, I contend, is eminently metaphysical and bears on our notions of the relationship between time, space, and causality. Williams has in mind a separation of the concrete poem from the lofty abstractions of metaphysicians, yet it is precisely this kind of separation that machinic speeds and relations call into question.
infinite, total substance, as what we might call a discrete object, thing, or quality. But between monism, modernism, and mode, something else has happened, so that the word "mo(der)nism" is no longer the sum of parts, or even part of a total sum, but, more accurately and less precisely, part of something, a collision of different modes, decomposing both, but recomposing them under a new regime of sense. In producing the speed that sweeps one concept into the other, the small machine of the word blurs them, and we are left with the kind of concept that Gilles Deleuze describes as "rigorous and inexact": inexact, because the boundaries between modernism and monism lose their sharp outlines, their separate definitions, yet rigorous, because the inexactitude of the concept is conscious, purposeful, and determined by the very conditions that make the concept possible (Bensmaïa 145-146). Those conditions are the various and multiform ways that speed was experienced from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a period in which speed became accessible—and noticeable—to more and more people, and in which it was generated in factories, railroads, automobiles, airplanes, in cities and on battlefields, in highways and in the sky, with a magnitude and intensity that was hitherto unprecedented (Kern 8-9)

I argue in this chapter that these changing experiences of space, time, and speed gave rise to a literary, speculative conception of speed as a blurring of subjects and their objective milieux. Previous modernist critics have tended to read modernist engagements with space, time, and speed as informed by sources such as Henri Bergson’s philosophy of time and the New Physics of Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and others. I will show, though, that well before either of these sources, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman were already responding in the nineteenth century to modern experiences of speed in ways that drew on Spinozan monism to rethink the relationship between subjects and objects, and that emerge in related, but more
radical, forms in the poetry of Hart Crane and Langston Hughes. I discussed in Chapter One and
Chapter Two how Spinoza’s monism expresses itself in the modernist literary practices of
morbid vitalism, in which life and death are permutations of a single monistic power, and
dynamic eternalism, in which eternity is not timelessness, but an immanent monistic power of
relation. In this chapter, I focus on the monism that emerges specifically from modernist
aesthetic and speculative engagements with technology, machines, and speed. Modernist
machine culture is perhaps most readily associated with mechanistic thinking, the reduction of
complex entities and phenomena to the sum of their parts, and, by extension, the experience of
alienation in technological modernity. What I will show, on the contrary, is that there is a
Spinozan strain of engagement with machines and speed that results not in a reductive
mechanism but rather in a monistic vision of speed as a dynamic power of composition and
relation, albeit one that is capable of being deployed in ways that are both constructive and
destructive, liberatory and repressive. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I term this
perspective “universal machinism” rather than mechanism.

I devote the first section of this chapter to situating my interpretation of Spinoza, using
Deleuze and Guattari’s work in A Thousand Plateaus and Deleuze’s cinematic theory to explore
the significance of speed and rhythms of motion and rest to Spinoza’s understanding of bodies. I
also connect the “machinic” monism that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to Spinoza to his
immanentism. Next, I read Spinoza’s monism alongside Paul Virilio’s theory of dromology,
which I use to articulate the political implications of identifying speed with power. Though
Virilio makes these political stakes clear in ways that Spinoza does not, I argue that Spinoza’s
emphasis on the ambivalence of power is a useful complement to Virilio’s theory, allowing us to
see the liberatory potential of modernist thinking about speed in addition to the repressive or
destructive potential that interests Virilio. I close the section by discussing the ways that the monism of the Spinozan strain offered modernist writers opportunities for thinking about speed and subject-object relations that cohered with the putative conclusions of the New Physics. In the second section of the chapter, I read Emerson’s essay “Power,” from *The Conduct of Life* (1860), as a response to nineteenth-century developments in machine and speed technology that frames Spinozan monism in machinic terms, entailing a view of bodies as composed of an infinity of parts distinguished from each other only by speeds and slownesses. I then analyze Whitman’s “To A Locomotive in Winter” (1876) as developing Emerson’s Spinozan monism toward a later modernist “poetics of blur,” an aesthetic examination of a machinic, monistic world whose parts blend together into a relatively indeterminate continuity when subjected to increasing levels of speed. In his musing upon locomotive speed, Whitman identifies and struggles with an especially pressing concern of this early blurred vision, namely that the radically provisional nature of blurred bodies challenges traditional notions of individual freedom; what, after all, is the agency of a subject that finds itself swept, at great and uncontrollable speed, into objects that would appear as discrete and concrete when viewed at rest? Whitman locates a certain kind of agency, I argue, in the concept of rhythm, a mode of regulated speed that could preserve some modicum of individuality in a world that seemed increasingly to render the subject a passenger of its own experiences, but without merely reasserting an inviolably stable version of the individual. In the third and fourth sections of the chapter, I turn to the modernists, first to Hart Crane and his 1930 poem cycle *The Bridge*, and then to Langston Hughes and his 1951 cycle *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. I argue that both of these works, for all of their differences, develop a poetic monism of blur through their examinations of distinctly modern “speed machines.” Crane takes Whitman as his poetic precursor and attempts to locate an exhilarating, liberatory power in the new
experiences of speed made possible not only by vehicles such as airplanes, but by new technologies of perception such as motion-picture photography. Crane intuits that Whitman’s monistic, pantheistic perspective was not only a variety of machinism, but that it could be framed directly in terms of speed; however, Crane’s poetics of blur lacks an effective principle of rhythmic speed. While he seizes on the dizzying joys of speed experience, he ultimately finds no way of resolving these aesthetic joys with the destructive power of speed. Hughes’s approach to speed, I argue, is quite different. The representative “speed machine” in Montage is not a vehicle, but the bebop combo, which provides the cycle with a poetic model in its improvisations, riffing, and rhythmic variations. Hughes picks up the imperative for rhythm that Whitman identifies in “To A Locomotive in Winter” and develops it as a means of imagining forms of participative resistance against a political system, represented most prominently by the police, that actively sought to enforce a particular distribution of speeds upon urban African American subjects. Hughes conceives of protest and collective resistance as rhythms of insurgency that assert a kind of freedom by disrupting the dominant regimes of speed, enabling particular distributions of speed and slowness that would ordinarily be restricted or refused by authorities such as the police. This kind of agency contrasts with the agency that Crane locates in subjective access to perilously uncontrollable speeds in The Bridge.

Before examining the emergence of universal machinism and a poetic monism of blur in Emerson, Whitman, Crane and Hughes, I want to begin by exploring why monism, speed, and machinism should be viewed, at least from a certain angle, as overlapping concepts. Though modernism is often framed as a critique of Cartesian dualism (by way of Jamesian pragmatism, for instance), its connection to Spinozan monism has been only sketchily portrayed, in part because modernists were often suspicious of, if not openly hostile toward, Romantic holism,
which was often conflated with Spinozan monism and pantheism, as I discuss in my previous chapter with regard to Santayana’s ambivalence toward Emerson. While Descartes argued for dualism, the idea that there are two kinds of underlying substance in the world (mind and extension, or body), Spinoza argued instead that there could be only one world made up of a single substance. The most obvious ramification of monism is that it does not privilege the mind as the unique locus of knowledge and freedom, as Descartes does, but views it as presenting the same reality as extension or space, only under a different attribute. Furthermore, as I discuss in my opening chapter, the immanentism of Spinoza’s system implies that there is no true interiority, no separate inner self sheltered from the world outside. While the Cartesian self is characterized by its potential for self-transparency, by the possibility of forming "clear and distinct" notions of the outside world through rigorous self-reflection, Spinoza's self is, so to speak, self-less: as Deleuze and Guattari contend, it is nothing more than a tendency, a habitual or characteristic relationship between an infinite number of bodies and ideas that fall in and out of relation with one another (A Thousand Plateaus 253-254). Spinoza might seem an oddly out-of-period choice for a discussion of modernist engagements with technology and speed since he inherits a vocabulary more familiar to medieval scholastic philosophers than to modern thinkers. But as I have argued in the preceding chapters, Spinozan ideas did shape the way modernists thought about death and time, and the same is true of modernist thinking about speed. Bergson once mused that "[o]ne could say that all philosophers have two philosophies: their own and that of Spinoza" (qtd. in Adamson 73). Hyperbole aside, this proclamation underscores that Spinoza’s philosophy, for all its antiquated terminology, was au courant among philosophers in the early

140 Descartes makes the case for dualism in two treatises: 1637’s Discourse on the Method and the Principles of First Philosophy of 1644. Spinoza summarizes and interprets the Cartesian position in his early work The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy (1663), though he does not fully articulate his own system until the posthumous publication of the Ethics in 1677.
twentieth century. Consider also the remarks of the Bergson’s contemporary Samuel Alexander, who opened a 1921 lecture on Spinoza and modern theories of time by declaring that “at least in all the questions that lie on the borderland of philosophy and physics, we are nearer to the great philosophers of [the seventeenth century] than we are to those of the nineteenth century […] Spinoza is more particularly suitable to consult” than much contemporary thinking (18-19). I contend that Spinoza’s world-view is in many ways profoundly modern, offering a thoroughly “blurred” vision in which there are only porous boundaries between objects and their perceivers, between thinkers and their thoughts, between thoughts and bodies, and, perhaps most radically, between ordered forms and the disorderly formlessness from which they necessarily take shape (A Thousand Plateaus 253). I argue that the Spinozan strain of monistic thinking that Crane and Hughes inherit from Emerson and Whitman has typically been overlooked because of two critical tendencies: a tendency to see Emerson’s legacy either in terms of a holistic Romantic idealism or a proto-pragmatist pluralism, thus overlooking his investment in a nuanced Spinozan monism, and a tendency to view modernist displacements of the subject-object divide in the context of modern science (Einsteinian relativity, for example) and its philosophical interlocutors (such as William James, Bergson, and Whitehead).

For my purposes, there are two sides of Spinoza's philosophy that offer a wealth of possibilities for thinking about speed in a modernist context, both of which benefit from being placed into conversation with Deleuze and Virilio, two thinkers who have been consistently fascinated by speed. Borrowing terminology from Deleuze and Guattari, I will refer to the first

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141 Deleuze and Virilio have also had considerable influence on one another, for all their other differences. A cursory glance at the contents and index of Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus reveals a handful of concepts and figures—including nomadism, the war machine, micropolitics, the suicidal state, and the fleet-in-being—that owe more than a passing debt to Virilio's writings from the late 1970s, and to Speed and Politics (1977) in particular. Virilio, for his part, has often made use of the theory of de- and re-territorialization, which Deleuze and Guattari outline in 1972's Anti-Oedipus. Nevertheless, there are differences between Deleuze and Virilio that deserve to be
of these facets as Spinoza’s “universal machinism.” The term derives from a passage of *A Thousand Plateaus* in which the authors make the case for the radicalism of Spinoza's monistic philosophy, and which hinges on a fascinating proposition from the *Ethics*: "Bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion-and-rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance" (E.II.P12.L1). A piece of steel differs from a human body by its degree of slowness—by the relative consistency of the speed at which its parts are related. More dramatically still, though, there are no irreducible terms in bodies, no smallest forms such as the atoms imagined by Democritus or pre-Einsteinian physics. Though Spinoza’s physics could not help but seem outmoded and unscientific by the time Newton and others had consolidated and formalized classical mechanics, it became newly relevant after the discoveries of Einstein and Heisenberg seemed to compromise the authority of the classical model. It is with this in mind that Deleuze and Guattari declare that "Spinoza's approach is radical: Arrive at elements that no longer have either form or function, that are abstract in this sense even though they are perfectly real. They are distinguished solely by movement and rest, slowness and speed" (253-254). If bodies are forms composed of formless elements held in more or less transitory relations of speed, then these particles of which bodies are composed are not solid objects, but only speeds of relation. These speeds determine both the continuity and discontinuity of particular bodies: the piece of steel has an internal consistency, a characteristic relation of speeds in a region of space under which it remains steel-like, yet, if the steel is heated, if the relation of the velocities that make up the steel change, the steel deforms—it softens and melts, or it becomes brittle and noted. There is a decidedly apocalyptic streak in Virilio's writings on speed and technology largely absent from those of Deleuze and Guattari, and Virilio has explicitly rejected the "Nietzschean" conception of power that underlies much of Deleuze's (and Guattari's) work ("From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond" 25-26). Though I am aware of these differences, and though my own perspective remains decidedly nearer to that of Deleuze, I will borrow quite liberally from Virilio's work wherever it strikes me as being valuable to do so.
breaks apart.\textsuperscript{142} This scheme sees bodies as secondary actualizations from the abstract, but nevertheless real, potentials that make it up; formed bodies are merely one way in which a region of formless potentials can actualize themselves. Reality itself amounts to what Deleuze and Guattari call the "machine of all functions" (\textit{A Thousand Plateaus 254}), or a "universal machinism" (256). Though the image of the machine appears to evoke the mechanistic view of the universe that many modernist writers and philosophers objected to, Deleuze and Guattari’s machinism is in fact an attempt to articulate a vision of nature that avoids the twin dangers of this dead mechanism (in which the whole is the sum of its parts) and of an idealist or Romantic holism (in which the parts are absorbed into the totalizing whole). Their nature eschews the binary oppositions of the natural and the artificial, the material and the ideal, the abstract and the concrete, the individual and the composite; it is “like an immense Abstract Machine, abstract yet real and individual; its pieces are the various assemblages and individuals, each of which groups together an infinity of particles entering into an infinity of more or less interconnected relations” (254). This Abstract Machine is a monistic, indeterminate (or virtual) potentiality engaged in unending and multiple processes of differentiating and individuating itself into determinate concrete forms. In this sense, we might think of it as an ontological engine.

But if all is part of this abstract machine, if the form or structure of seemingly discrete objects comes from unformed elements, what, exactly, are the relations of speed and rest that

\textsuperscript{142} A word is needed about the term "part," which must be understood in a strictly practical sense, and not a conceptual one. Spinoza denies that either intensive (mental) or extensive substance (either mind or body) can be divided; that is, anything existing in substance does so not as an object contained in space, but as undivided space manifesting specific formal qualities in a given "region" (E.I.P15; Bennett, \textit{A Study of Spinoza's Ethics} 85-88). Space is radically continuous, but variably differentiated; space is ontologically basic, but objects in space are not. This argument is the basis of Jonathan Bennett's ingenious "field-metaphysic" reading of objects in space, which he explores in \textit{A Study of Spinoza's Ethics} (88-92).
compose objects in the first place? Spinoza is vague on this point, but Deleuze moves us closer to an answer in his late essay "Spinoza and the Three Ethics":

Structure is rhythm, that is, the linking of figures that compose and decompose [object] relations [...] The structure or object is formed by at least two bodies, each of which in turn are formed by two or more bodies, to infinity, while in the other direction they are united into ever larger and more composite bodies, until one reaches the unique object of Nature in its entirety, an infinitely transformable and deformable structure, universal rhythm. (25, emphasis in the original)

This rhythmic solution to the problem of modal relations is consistent with Deleuze's earlier formulation, with Guattari, of monism as a universal machinism. Here, we see that the machinic relations are, in fact, rhythmic: various degrees and magnitudes of a single potency—nothing less than speed itself—compose discernible objects from a total structure that nevertheless remains entirely fluid at every moment. The infinite de- and re-composition of ephemeral bodies from mobile "parts" that are not objects, nor relations between objects, but only relations between relations, potencies inconsistently knitted together through the consistency of space itself—these are the relations that, I argue, will come to define some of the most interesting and radical approaches to speed in literary modernism. As I will show in the pages to come, there are uncanny resemblances between this universal machinism of rhythmic speeds and such metaphor-machines (and machine metaphors) as Crane's Brooklyn Bridge, or even Emerson's "world-mill," to say nothing of what Hughes describes in his prefatory note to Montage as his poem of "conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms [...] punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition" (The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 387, my emphasis). If we take Deleuze’s lead and
view Spinozan monism as a kind of “machinism,” we can more clearly see how modernist and proto-modernist writers like Emerson, Whitman, Crane, and Hughes utilize modern experiences of speed to articulate new, monistic ways of understanding the interrelation of subjects and their objective *milieux*.

The second side of Spinoza's monism that I rely upon in my analysis of modernist and proto-modernist discussions of speed is related to the study of speed-power, what Virilio in *Speed and Politics* (1977) calls “dromology,” from the Greek *dromos*, or race-track (*Speed and Politics* 8-9). Virilio outlines a theory of politics in which speed is “an existential measure” of “the motor-power of living beings,” that is, a measure of bodily powers to act and move in a system where the epitome of political power is the control of movement (114). As Benjamin H. Bratton notes in his introduction to *Speed and Politics*, "Paul Virilio's modernity is logistical. It doesn't deal directly with war, but with everything that makes it possible [...] Modernity is a world in motion, expressed in translations of strategic space into logistical time, and back again" (7, emphasis in the original). For Virilio, then, speed is the measure and animating force of these variable translations between space and time. The power that it provides is ultimately the freedom of potential movement, the power not only to enter into and withdraw from a given set of relations between bodies, but also to intercept and control the movements of slower bodies. In this sense, speed-power is a monism proper to technological modernity. I suggest throughout this chapter that it is possible to read an analogous monistic equivalence of power and speed in Spinoza. Though there is no dialogue with Spinoza’s ideas in Virilio’s work, there is an interesting resonance between the two thinkers in that Spinoza also conceives of power as a capacity to act that is determined, under the attribute of extension (that is, spatially) by relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness. A body’s encounters with other bodies subject it to
different rhythms of motion and rest, which in turn determine its range of capabilities. Unlike Spinoza, though, Virilio’s understanding of speed is explicitly and primarily political. Reading Spinoza’s monism dromologically can help us to discern the political stakes of his kinetic understanding of bodies in the context of a modernity that had become increasingly defined by the governmentality of speed (what Virilio calls “dromocracy”) in ways that Spinoza could not have predicted. Since Virilio historicizes the experience of speed in the context of the specific conditions of technological modernity, reading his dromology alongside Spinoza’s monism helps to identify and illuminate concerns about speed technology, freedom, and agency that were absent from Spinoza’s time, emergent in Emerson and Whitman’s, and pressing in Crane and Hughes’s. For Virilio, technological progress is driven largely by military and logistical competition between different political bodies, whether through the implementation of better methods of mobilizing and transporting armed forces, police, and military materiel, or through the development of faster, more efficient methods of industrial production (138-139). As state power becomes increasingly centralized, governments strive harder and harder to control both the vectors and speeds by which their populations can move; if power is essentially a matter of speed, then power is also always potentially military in nature, always capable of being weaponized or deployed repressively (Duffy 42). The effect of this historical situation, as Virilio sees it, is an increasingly dangerous and progressive annihilation of space through technologies that save time, not only through the proliferation of vehicles with obvious military uses (automobiles, aircraft, railroads), but through the ever-intensifying efficiency of industrial production (Speed and Politics 150-152).

While Virilio’s insights are useful for identifying the specific political anxieties that modernist texts might reasonably have about speed, he tends toward a monochromatic pessimism
that often obscures the ways that different kinds of speed might conceivably be used to resist the speed-policing of dromocratic modernity. As I argue below, Virilio’s thinking is usefully tempered by Spinoza in this respect, for although Spinoza does not write of speed with the historical specificity of dromological theory, he is acutely aware that in a world constituted by various manifestations of a single, monistic power, it is impossible to identify inherently “good” or “bad” deployments of that power, or of speed. This is an insight that the writers of the Spinozan strain take to heart. In the plane crash that makes up the climax of Crane’s “Cape Hatteras,” speed is a power that tends to be so dramatically unstable as to be uncontrollable. Meanwhile, in a poem like Hughes's *Montage*, speed offers social and political promise precisely because it is fugacious, because it might be used to elude or disrupt (through unexpected or inadmissible “rhythms”) the dominant forces that seek to police it. While Virilio helps us to see the political repress to which Hughes responds, Deleuze and Guattari’s machinic reading of Spinoza helps us to see how Hughes’s use of the bebop ensemble as a poetic model thinks through ways of resisting the disproportionate policing of movement that African American subjects experienced in many American cities.

Deleuze’s universal machinism and Virilio’s dromology provide useful resources for examining the Spinozan strain in modernist engagements with speed technologies. While previous critics have emphasized the impact of modern science and technology on modernist thinking about space and time,143 few have considered how modern speed experiences relate to monism, or how that relation contributed to the emergence of new machinic understandings of materiality, individual freedom, and the relationship between subject and *milieu*. The critical

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143 Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* is perhaps the best-known example, though Lisa M. Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* and Cecelia Tichi’s *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* also come to mind.
Reticence to treat speed in its own right is perhaps informed by a healthy suspicion of the often bombastic, misogynistic, and not infrequently Fascist rhetoric and themes of such early speed theorists and artists as F. T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists, particularly the later aeropittura (aero-painting) movement; indeed, it is one of the burdens of any critical study of cultural experiences of speed to acknowledge and interrogate the dubious, chauvinistic politics that have often championed its singular virtue. Stephen Kern addresses some of these concerns in the context of Italian Futurism and their speed aesthetics in his seminal study *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (1983), where he devotes a chapter to exploring "the tension between a speeding reality and a slower past" in what he calls "the age of speed" (130). Perhaps the most significant contribution to the study of speed in modernist culture since Kern’s study is Enda Duffy's *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (2009), which has influenced my own account of the subject and which points toward a growing recognition of the importance of speed experience in shaping cultural responses to modernity. This new focus on speed contrasts with its relatively peripheral nature in Kern, where speeds seems less a concept in its own right than a conceptual bridge between time and space. Indeed, Kern says as much in his introduction: "My [chapter] categories thus encompass a wide range of human activities and are mutually exclusive—except for the material on speed. I treat speed in a separate chapter because it was widely discussed around the turn of the century as a topic in its own right [...] and because as a juncture of time and space it formed a natural transition between them" (3). This perspective is less a shortcoming of Kern's than an indication of a general tendency to treat speed as conceptually subordinate to space and time. I do not deny that speed implicates and depends upon these other concepts, but I follow Duffy’s suggestion that speed was among the most
startlingly novel, exhilarating, and often disruptive experiences furnished by industrial modernity, and that it ought to be considered in its own right (1).

My argument moves in a different direction from Duffy’s, though, to the extent that I discern a crucial imbrication of Spinozan ideas—namely, monism and the immanence of the productive forces of God or nature ("Deus sive natura")—with the experience of speed in a strain of modernist and proto-modernist writing about speed and technology spanning from Emerson and Whitman to Crane and Hughes. One of the benefits of examining this formation of writers in these contexts is that they begin the difficult work of thinking through the social and political implications of the radical continuity of disparate categories such as subject and object, time and space, and materiality and ideality. In an age that saw the unprecedented expansion of the average person's access to high speed, the proliferation of machines in the workplace and at home, and the widespread acceptance of the theory of relativity, speculative arts such as philosophy and literature came to depict speed less as the *trait d'union* between space and time than as a *haecceity* or "thisness" that unfolds in both dimensions at once, differentiating space-time into localities and blurring those localities into continuity with one another. The primary feature of a world populated by haecceities instead of objects is what I have called "blur," which we can understand not merely as the disappearance of boundaries between observers and *milieux*, or subjects and objects, but as the indefinite, ongoing overlap of a series of haecceities. Like the vision of perpetual, immanent death that I describe in my first chapter, in the blurred world of haecceities things slip constantly away from themselves; there are no true identities in a world of

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144 The concept of the *haecceity* has had a long and storied philosophical life, beginning with the medieval theologian Duns Scotus, for whom it represented the indwelling quality that differentiates any one thing from another. More recently, it has figured in the vocabularies of Charles Sanders Peirce and Gilles Deleuze, who relates it to Whitehead's "event."
blur, but only entities distinguished from one another by their differential relations of motion and rest. This is the experience that Virilio terms the “dissolving view” in which “this world as we see it is passing away” (The Aesthetics of Disappearance 47, italics in the original). In his 1912 manifesto on “Futurist Sculpture,” Umberto Boccioni proposes that the plastic arts adopt a vision of “physical transcendentalism,” a notion similar to this aspect of blur as haecceity, wherein art becomes the translation of “those atmospheric planes which bind and intersect things” which produce “sympathetic effects and mysterious affinities which create formal and reciprocal influences between the different planes of an object” (115). In a blurred world, solid objects lose their opacity and become vaguer entities—variable relations in space and time between a practically unlimited number of intersecting planes, a this-space and this-time ever on the brink of spilling into that-time, that-space.

Innovations in modern physics in the early twentieth century played a significant role in making a world of blur, haecceities, and continuities between seemingly disparate bodies attractive to modern writers. There emerged, in the form of the theory of relativity, a way of considering time and space not as relatively separate domains, but as being continuous with and shaped by speed. "In the first place," wrote Albert Einstein in 1920, "we entirely shun the vague word 'space,' of which, we must honestly acknowledge, we cannot form the slightest conception, and we replace it by 'motion relative to a practically rigid body of reference'" (Relativity: The Special and General Theory 13). Though Einstein's declaration represented the logical conclusions of work that he had begun some fifteen years earlier in the 1905 papers that laid the groundwork for the theories of special relativity and mass-energy equivalence, these conclusions were still radical and novel to the general public, especially in America, where Einstein was welcomed as a celebrity when he visited in 1921 (Steinman 6-7). Though few outside of the
scientific community likely understood the complexities of the "New Physics" that rose up around Einstein, Heisenberg, Planck, and others, it was clear that the old intuitions about space and time could no longer be taken for granted. Einsteinian relativity implied two drastic revisions of the way space and time were conceived: firstly, it showed space to be meaningless except relative to time, since any movement through extended space also implied time, leaving us not with two separate, but related, dimensions, but only the single, inextricable concept of space-time, appearing as a variety of monism; secondly, relativity insisted that measurements of space-time itself would be variable in relation to the speed of the observing body (Relativity 103). Though technically relativity applies to observation absolutely, in practical terms it was in large part only a live issue for physicists engaged in extremely detailed and specific measurements; however, as Steinman contends, this fact did not stop writers from the 1920s into the 1950s from speculating (rightly or wrongly) that relativity had broader implications for knowledge more generally. According to Steinman, for writers like Crane, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, "Einsteinian physics was often enlisted as a sanction for [a] poetics of process," and was often conflated with the process philosophies of Bergson and Whitehead, among others (Steinman 58). Though by now there has been much writing on the links between relativity and modern literature, of which Steinman's text is one of the best examples, this scholarship tends to abstract the component of speed into relativity more generally. However, relativity was not only a justification for a poetics of process, but also, in Crane and Hughes, for a poetics and a monism of speed.

Heisenberg's 1927 formulation of the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics pointed more radically still to the problems speed posed even to the basic observation of atomic phenomena. The core of Heisenberg's discovery was that the position and velocity of a particle
under observation were not intrinsic to the particles themselves (that is, quantum particles are not localized in particular spaces and do not move at uniform speeds) but were in a sense generated by the very act of measurement (Heisenberg xi). To put it reductively, Heisenberg discovered that the act of measurement inscribed sharp divisions on quantum phenomena that were intrinsically "blurry." Thus, before it is observed, the quantum particle is not the irreducible piece of matter that Democritus and the classical atomists understood by the term atomos, but something more akin to a field of potentials or an as-yet undetermined set of outcomes that could be actualized depending on the means of measurement. As Heisenberg later described it in 1958, "the transition from 'possible' to 'actual' takes place during the act of observation" (28). Though Heisenberg never achieved the celebrity of Einstein, and though his ideas, like Einstein's, would be misinterpreted and stretched in myriad ways, the uncertainty principle nevertheless contributed to the sense among many modernist writers that the New Physics was in the process of dispelling the image of the material world as eternally stable and pre-determined (Steinman 66-67). Further still, Heisenberg's discoveries in quantum mechanics suggested that there was still value and, more importantly, validity in imagining or speculating about that which precedes any possible human experience. For a poet like Crane, who tended toward idealism, this sense of the validity of the a priori seemed to legitimate The Bridge's mythopoetic quest to depict the formless, pre-subjective world that gives rise to the plural forms of experience. For a poet of decidedly materialist tendencies such as the later Hughes, this sense instead authorized a poetic effort, in Montage of a Dream Deferred, to forge a notion of community that has neither the discrete individual nor the totalizing collective as its object, but only a single self-differing rhythm (or speed) that gives rise in the same moment to individuals and collectives who are only as stable as the rhythm that sustains them.
The New Physics, I would argue, proposed in scientific terms an understanding of the world that Spinoza had anticipated in metaphysical terms with his monistic view of all things as permutations and differentiations of an immanent force of being. According to Duffy, the New Physics offered to modernist art a sense of phenomenological disruption and that speed relativized perception, dissolving the “critical distance” of the observer from the observed, the subject from the object (50-51). At the same time, the emergence of the differential geometry that undergirds the New Physics suggested a “continuist” world, that is, one undergirded by a continuum between undifferentiated, formless, intensive space, on the one hand, and differentiated, formed, extensive space on the other. It follows from this continuism that the pluralism of actual forms does not preclude, but requires and presumes, a formless monism of the virtual or indeterminate; together, these two categories amount to something akin to Spinoza’s single self-differentiating substance. If we pair this continuism with the treatment of speed in literary modernism—if we read speed as a virtualizing force that melts or abstracts solid objects—we may well find that speed is an ingredient in the "magic formula" that Deleuze and Guattari giddily pursue in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "PLURALISM = MONISM" (20). What emerges from this formula is an expansive or anomalous materialism that understands the world as being composed of a plurality of concrete entities that are constantly individuated from a single virtual field, a plane of immanent potentiality. Analyzing the Spinozan strain from the perspective of speed allows us to see how writers typically associated with various forms of holistic idealism, such as Emerson and Crane, and those more commonly thought of as having less stridently idealist, even materialist commitments, such as Whitman and Hughes, are actually straining toward a more complicated metaphysics with significant consequences for the agency and autonomy of the subject. For the modernists among this group of writers, who think of speed
in a Spinozan manner and with an awareness of the scientific novelties of the New Physics, the “relativity” of subject and object, the annihilation of “critical distance,” was not merely a phenomenological matter (one of perception or appearances), as is Duffy’s focus, but an ontological one (a matter of being). If the blurring of bodies is ontological and not just phenomenological, it requires new accounts of how a subject could still exert agency or freedom in a world without clear subject-object, or even object-object, boundaries. The monistic modernists implicitly pose a Spinozan question: what is a speed-blurred body capable of doing?

In addition to the problem of freedom and autonomy, the monism of speed poses the problem that speed, conceived as a kind of power, is ambivalent. While it can produce radically new relations between differently individuated bodies, speed can also be harnessed to repressive or destructive ends. As Virilio is always quick to remind us, the invention of new velocities is often simultaneous with, and even propelled by, the invention of new weapons. Virilio goes so far as to declare that the "State's political power, therefore, is only secondarily 'power organized by one class to oppress another.' More materially, it is the polis, the police, in other words highway surveillance, [...] confusing social order with the control of traffic" (Speed and Politics 39). Though we may take or leave Virilio's contention that class struggle is secondary to the struggle for speed, his claim that speed is often a repressive, rather than liberatory, power is a significant intuition of Crane’s and Hughes’s. The two sides of speed-power can be illuminated by a helpful distinction from Spinoza's Latin: if speed is in one sense a potentia, a power to do, to act, to feel, to transform, it is also, in another sense, a potestas, or a power over, a power against, which we might also imagine as a power to repress, destroy, dominate, or deform (Negri, The Savage Anomaly xi-xiii). Though Spinoza does not quite present a dromology avant la lettre, his system nevertheless contains the necessary elements to frame speed-power as a monism, an
immanent force of differentiation and relation that is intrinsically ambivalent. The one power of speed must be negotiated in and through the other; if the blur of speed suggests a potential liberation from stifling boundaries and divisions, it nevertheless risks being perverted into totalitarianism, the reckless acceleration of speed to such a degree that difference either slips away completely or is destroyed (The Virilio Reader 32-34). Ambivalence about the connection between speed and power prevents Emerson from fully articulating the consequences of the universal machinism that he begins to theorize in “Power,” leaving it to Whitman to develop more fully, and with greater attention to the significance of rhythm and modulation, in “To a Locomotive in Winter.” Crane, I argue, overemphasizes the liberatory potentia of speed in taking the radical velocities of the airplane as a primary model for his poetics of blur. Though he recognizes that a destructive potestas can emerge from speed, he is ultimately unable to articulate a way of moderating this destructive power. Hughes, on the contrary, writes with a more acute sense of speed’s ambivalence and turns instead to musical rhythm as a poetic model and a principle of moderation. Rhythm demands caution in music; even the frenzied speed of bebop does not spiral uncontrollably toward absolute speed but regulates its modulations and improvisations according to a rhythmic structure.

II. Transcendentalist Monism and Machinic Relations

Between Emerson and Whitman, machinism emerged gradually, uncertainly, from a Transcendentalist (and more broadly Romantic) pantheism that had deep roots in the debates surrounding Spinoza’s monistic philosophy in late eighteenth-century Germany. On this point,

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145 See also plateau nine of A Thousand Plateaus, “1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity,” where Deleuze and Guattari make use of Virilio’s concept of the “suicidal state.”
146 Frederick C. Beiser’s The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte is perhaps the most detailed English-language account of the German philosophical grappling with Spinoza and pantheism (see pp. 44-108 in
I challenge one of the historical claims that Cecelia Tichi makes in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*. In this text, Tichi argues that the modernist era introduced a radically new relationship between literary producers and the natural world that "fostered a conception of the human being as a machine for the consumption and production of energy [and which] defined nature similarly as a congeries of machines and structures comprised of interworking component parts" (xii). In this modernist world of "gears and girders," the literary producer became less a conduit for the expression of a world spirit, as in the older Romantic model of artistic production, than an engineer or designer of word-machines. As important and valuable as Tichi's intervention in the discourse of the machine in modernism is, she is too hasty in asserting that "the machine world of gears and girders displaced the dominant Romantic view of a holistic, spiritual world of vegetative and bodily being" (xiii). I observe a somewhat different relationship between Romantic holism and modernism. The Spinozan machinism that I explore in the work of Emerson, Whitman, Crane, and Hughes, in fact, absorbs the immanence implicit in Romantic holism (the sense of a world suffused with a vital or divine force), though it refuses the notion of an overarching, ideal unity that subsumes its parts. This universal machinism recognizes what Tichi observes, that “[t]he world of trees and animals, like that of engines, is by definition a world of component-part constructions,” but tends to figure the Romantic Absolute not as a unifying culmination of these components, but only as the immanent *potentia* of component-parts to compose themselves in infinitely variable relations with one another (34). What I read at the end of Emerson’s “Power,” for instance, is more akin to what I refer to in my introduction as a non-totalizing totality or open whole, a constant and immanent process of machinic assemblage. While I do not contest Tichi’s claim that the *ethos* of the writer-

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particular). See also Leon Chai’s discussion of Romantic pantheism in *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (271-327).
as-designer belongs more properly to modernism, we should also be aware that when we speak of machine aesthetics in modernism, we are speaking already of a diversity of positions, some of which have a more complicated and intimate relationship to Romanticism than Tichi suggests. I find the most interesting and complicated distinctions between these two periods not in machines themselves, but in the "consumption and production of energy" that they enable. In order to understand how writers like Emerson and Whitman, or Crane and Whitman, employ the resources of the Spinozan strain to explore the implications of modern technology for individual freedom and the relationship of parts to wholes, we must engage with the problem of the force that governs relations in space—we must deal with speed.147

Although the speeds available to people of the mid-nineteenth century were qualitatively different than those available to people in the following century, they were similar enough to prompt speculative and imaginative thinkers like Emerson and Whitman to theorize a universal machinism from conceptual resources furnished by the strain of monistic and immanentist philosophy that issued from Spinoza. These initial steps toward universal machinism pointed forward to the poetic monism of blur that modernists like Crane and Hughes would later develop. Emerson and Whitman came of age at a time when the most dramatic means of accessing high speeds—railways and steamships—were collective modes of transportation. When Whitman writes in 1876 of his locomotive in winter, he addresses a culture that had only just begun to know the bicycle, which would so dramatically impact popular culture in the next decade that the French writer Paul Adam described it as having created a "cult of speed" (qtd. in Kern 111).

147 Of course, it is not Tichi's aim to provide a full-fledged analysis of the transformative power of speed, so its absence from her work is no mark against her. Nevertheless, in implicitly relegating speed to a sub-category of the cultural experience of technology, Tichi echoes the tendency of the period (which we also see in Kern's earlier and similarly brief treatment of speed in The Culture of Time and Space) to see speed more as a bridge to other topoi than as a concept that demands analysis on its own terms.
Whether in the convoys of trains that passed through the depots and stations of the Pennsylvania Railroad or among the rows of powered looms that facilitated the labour of textile workers in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, the bulk and magnitude of nineteenth-century speed technologies was as notable as the speeds that they supplied (Nye 111-112). While the modernists could experience tremendous speeds individually and at their own direction, as pilots and drivers of aircraft and automobiles or bicycles, for instance, the experience of high speeds in Emerson and Whitman’s time was still, by its very nature, a relatively "territorialized" one: the speed of transportation still relied on the static routes of rivers or on laid track, while the productive speed of factories was still tied for the most part to rivers, if water-powered, or, if not, to enormous steam engines such as those produced by George H. Corliss at his Providence, Rhode Island workshop between the 1840s and 1860s (Nye 119-120). The fact that speed technologies were not yet as mobile or free-moving as they were in the years to come tended to reinforce the sense of separation between mobile subjects and (relatively) fixed machinery, but Emerson and Whitman made significant speculative and aesthetic steps toward troubling this distinction.

Given Emerson’s reputation as an exemplar of Romantic idealism and the popular image of him as a rustic seer, the “Sage of Concord” holding court at a cautious remove from the busy streets of Boston, one might expect him to be altogether hostile to the machine. On the contrary, Emerson’s reflections on machines, informed by the nineteenth century’s distinct experiences of speed, allow him to elaborate a rather Spinozan ontology that blurs subjects and objects, humans and machines, viewing all entities as made up of an infinite arrange of parts, held together by a fluid causal force that later writers will figure explicitly as relations of speed and rest. In this sense, we can discover an Emerson whose preoccupations are not limited to the idealist
infinitude of the mind, but whose thinking approaches that of later post-humanist philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari. In the early essay "Spiritual Laws," Emerson decries that human beings “interfere with the optimism of nature” by conforming to established habits and customs, as though “all virtue work[s] in one and the same way” (Selected Essays and Lectures 307). These conformities, he declares, are “mechanical actions,” repetitions of a model or expectation, rather than vital activities that spring from the direct impulsions of nature (307). He goes on to frame the distinction: “The simplicity of the universe is very different from the simplicity of the machine" (307-308). The universe’s simplicity is that of directness, intuition, immediacy, or what Emerson in “Experience” terms whim, a synchronization of our actions with our natural impulsions or desires, whereas the simplicity of the machine is to repeat the action that it has been engineered to perform. At this point, the machine does not suggest to Emerson what I have been calling universal machinism, or the view of the universe as a whole-less infinitude of parts engaged in ongoing processes of composition dictated by multiple rhythms of speeds and slownesses, but mere mechanism, the idea that we can know everything about a given whole by knowing the sum activity of its parts. There is in this work a continuing reluctance to classify humanity in terms of the machine; however, years later, in “Power” (1860), Emerson begins to unsettle this distinction in dramatic ways:

The world is mathematical, and has no casualty, in all its vast and flowing curve [...] A man hardly knows how much he is a machine, until he begins to make telegraph, loom, press, and locomotive, in his own image. But in these, he is forced to leave out his follies and hindrances, so that when we go to the mill, the machine is more moral than we. Let a man dare go to a loom, and see if he be
equal to it. Let machine confront machine, and see how they come out. (Essays and Lectures 986, italics mine).

The "we" of “Spiritual Laws” who are full of "mechanical actions" (but are nevertheless quite different from bare machines) becomes assimilated more closely to the machine itself; "we," too, are machines, even as Emerson strives to sharpen the distinction between human and machine as much as he can allow. Tellingly, it is the contact of human beings with what we might, for ease of reference, call technical machines—devices for communication, like telegraphs, presses, and locomotives, or, with the loom, for weaving disparate materials tightly together—that inform them of their own mechanism and, by extension, as I argue below, of the significance of speed.

Embedded in this passage of Emerson's is an important ambiguity that constitutes one of the characteristics of what I am theorizing under the concept of "blur": the human recognizes its own mechanism by observing the machines it creates, and yet, these machines are figured as products of a distinctly human process of self-making. While Emerson points the way toward a universal machinism in “Power,” he is more inclined to preserve the specificity of the human relative to its various machineries than Whitman and the modernists. If Emerson clears a path to think through the blurring of subjects and objects, it is one that he seems anxious to follow to its end. In short, he is anxious to mark a line between the subject and the object so as not to dissolve their difference altogether; the human machine is not equivalent to the technical machine. If there is a line between the human and the machine in Emerson's figuring, it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint by the time he writes "Power." In this essay, the technical machine, since it is produced to fulfill specific functions or teloi, is produced to perform those tasks as efficiently and perfectly as possible. In this sense, it lacks the "follies and hindrances" of its creator. But Emerson clearly means something more profound when he declares that "the
machine is more moral than we are" (986, emphasis mine). Here, we must keep in mind Emerson's ethical emphasis on whim, by which we might gloss as the acceptance and understanding of what determines us to act in particular ways, and which, in the human context, means attending to those desires that are unconscious and unpredictable before emerging into conscious experience. If we read Emerson one way, he appears to be saying, oddly enough, that the technical machine is more perfectly moral than the human machine because it lacks the anxiety over determinism and free will: it does as it is determined to do without resistance, and so is all the more effective at what it does. Nevertheless, although Emerson suggests that machines are better attuned and less resistant to their fates than human beings, it is not the case that he imagines a flat equivalency between human beings and technical machines. The human machine is not a passive link in a single chain of causality, but a confluence of causal forces that recombines and re-expresses its passive content in new and different ways. It is for this reason that the human machine, when it prefers will to whim, appears less “moral” than the machine, less capable of affirming its own powers of acting.

By 1860, Emerson’s reflections on the machine lead him not only to blur the distinction between human subjects and the mechanical world of objects (however ambivalently), but also to theorize the world itself in machinic terms. But, as in "Spiritual Laws," there is a still a difference of scale between the two types of machine. Against the example of the closed, finite

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148 In his 1922 statement of purpose "WE: Variant of a Manifesto," the Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov (best known for the 1929 film Man With a Movie Camera and for his pioneering theories of montage) makes a startlingly similar, though far less anxious declaration: "The machine makes us ashamed of man's inability to control himself, but what are we to do if electricity's unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones?" (Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov 7). Vertov's films, which strive to present "[t]he theory of relativity on the screen," "dynamic geometry, the race of points, lines, planes, volumes," and "the poetry of machines" (9), are cinematic analogues to Crane's project in The Bridge. Crane, himself and admirer of cinema (though likely unaware of Vertov), will seek a "poetry of machines" of his own by converting Emerson's lament for the failings of humanity before the machine into a challenge: what kind of machine is the human, and what kind of machine can it become?
system of the calico mill, Emerson speaks of the complex, open system of being itself as the "world-mill" (986). The term is by no means central to Emerson's vocabulary, but here it is pregnant with implications. The most obvious and important for my purposes is that Emerson performs a sort of purposeful blurring between the factory and the world, between industrial processes and metaphysics; the image of the world-mill evokes the speed and efficiency of mechanical production, as opposed to the slower labour of spinning and weaving textiles by hand and suggests a fertile link to the "universal machinism" that Deleuze and Guattari find in Spinoza, where all things are flattened onto "a plane of consistency occupied by an immense abstract machine comprising an infinite number of assemblages" (A Thousand Plateaus 256). All things, whether subject or object, subject or milieu, are composite relations, and may fall in or out of any number of larger or smaller relations. However, if the looms of the calico mill transform one input (processed cotton) into a predictable and consistent output (calico), then Emerson suggests that there is no such predictability in the relation of his abstract machine, the world-mill, to the human being. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, or even Spinoza, though, Emerson still imagines the human machine as having specific and perhaps primary importance: the human being is uniquely capable of taking up the infinite, multitudinous array of causes, re-configuring and re-expressing them with a difference. As I read it, this human machine recalls the titular figure of Emerson's essay "The Poet," who is "only half himself," while "the other half is his expression" (448). The human machine, like the poet, works by taking in one sort of world, one vast causal web, and putting out another; novelty and change enter this world, in part, by passing through the recombination mechanism of human perception.

I would like to dwell for a moment longer on the distinctions between the two types of machine in Emerson. If the technical machine is more moral than the human insofar as it does
not have the option of resisting its fate, of attempting futilely to impose its will against the causes that determine its nature, then ironically, in order to be “more moral,” the human must become more accepting of its role as machine—that is, as one more assemblage of capacities and powers that are not sovereign but determined, however complex they may be. In a manner of speaking, the technical machine is inherently whimsical—it cannot so much as entertain the idea of free, self-conscious will, but instead operates according to whim—that is, in the way that outside forces determine it to operate. If it is odd to think of a machine as being whimsical, then all the better for Emerson, as the seeming absurdity of the moral machine challenges the complacent presumption that the human being is strictly defined by conscious thought and subjective introspection. In the brief equation of machines with human beings at the end of "Power," Emerson asks us to entertain the thought that the root of our humanity may not be in the depths of subjective interiority but scattered afield in the world of objects themselves. Although Emerson often reasons that the human being is not truly individual but trans-individual, intersubjective, or dependent on external relations to function as an individual at all, he seldom comes as close as he does in "Power" to suggesting that the human being may be, in fact, trans-human. This reading of the end of "Power" lends new credence and weight to the essay's beginning, which reads as though it were a paraphrase of Spinoza's dictum that "nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body's capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do" (EIII.P2s). In Spinoza's stead, Emerson declares that "there is not yet any inventory of a man's faculties, any more than a bible of his opinions" (971). By the end of "Power," we find that these faculties, like the affects and powers of the Spinozan body, may not belong to particular people at all, or to particular human bodies, but to the intervening spaces and relations between particular things. The space in which we "[let]
machine confront machine, and see how they come out" may turn out, after all, to be the space of blur itself. Though Emerson himself remained reluctant to push in this direction, it is enough that it lives just beneath the surface of his work, where it suggests a blurring of the relation between the human and its *milieu*, on the one hand, and the producer and the product, on the other. This sense of a blurred, continuous world—as well as the political and social anxieties that go with it—comes to the surface in the works of a variety of writers leading into the modernist period, from Whitman and Henry Adams to Crane and Hughes.

If there is a certain forward-looking optimism in Emerson's Spinozan injunction to explore the limits of what human faculties can do, there is nevertheless an unresolved anxiety in his conclusion that human beings may well be as mechanistic as the mills and presses that they operate. This sentiment becomes all the more prescient, and troubling, if we read it in the context of the national cataclysm that occurred not twelve months after *The Conduct of Life* was published. The American Civil War demonstrated the pernicious side of the technological modernity that Emerson designated with his term "world-mill," as tens of thousands of volunteers and draftees found themselves cogs in either the Confederate or Union war machines, where they witnessed the new intensity with which the two sides employed the machinery of railroads and the electric telegraph in order to achieve the strategic advantage of speed or freedom of action. Over the course of the war, both sides would turn to military engineers for stop-gap solutions to arrest the newfound speed with which their opponents could mobilize, deploy, and communicate. These solutions took the form of increasingly complex earthworks and fortifications, presaging the static trench warfare of the First World War (Hagerman 243).149

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149 In *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*, Edward Hagerman stresses the importance of military engineers—and particularly of the West Point-educated engineer and theorist Dennis Hart Mahan—in developing field fortification techniques that were essential facets of Civil War battlefields from 1863 onward (9-
Although there is a growing suspicion among historians of the oft-repeated truism that the American Civil War inaugurated the period of modern warfare, there is no question that it was the most tangible evidence, for many of its observers and participants, of the readiness with which the new technologies and machinery of the nineteenth century were integrated into the strategic considerations of war planners and logisticians on both sides. Americans on either side of the conflict volunteered or were pressed into service by the thousands, while railroad and electric telegraph networks proved their central importance as multipliers of the speed of communications and transportation, both of manpower and materiel (A. D. Harvey 273-74). By the late stages of the war, the supply trains of the Union army functioned as machines that were perhaps more complex and streamlined than the calico mills that Emerson describes in "Power."

Edward Hagerman observes that "[q]uartermaster personnel administered the wagon trains with the efficiency of a mass-production assembly line [including] interchangeable precision parts [and] maintenance routines using portable maintenance equipment manned by artisans and mechanics," all functioning together with the armaments and materiel manufactories on the home front, and with the workers who populated them, as a vast logistical machine (246). Virilio, who argues that early photographic and cinematic techniques developed in response to the military imperative to observe (and thus counteract) an opposing force's potential for speed, reminds us that the deployment of "camera-kites, camera-pigeons and camera balloons [in the Civil War] predated the intensive use of chronophotography and cinematography on board small reconnaissance aircraft [during the First World War]" (War and Cinema 12). Thus, when

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11) In Speed and Politics, Virilio comments that land-clearing and fortification in warfare are means of establishing a "field of vision" rather than merely of occupying and denying access to space, since "the speed of this vision—ideally without obstacles—causes distances to approach" (94).

150 See, for instance, Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh's recent "Total War and the American Civil War Reconsidered: The End of an Outdated 'Master Narrative'" and Mark E. Neely, "Was the Civil War a Total War?"
Emerson describes the uncanny parallelism between the human and the technical machine on the eve of the Civil War, there is more truth than science-fiction in his observations. While the nineteenth century may have made increasingly visible the "universal machinism" or composite nature of objects and subjects alike, it also heralded the acceleration of what Virilio describes as "dromocratic progress": the tendency for the state to manifest its power as the control of circulation, or the access of the masses to speed, and, by extension, to control the "speeds and slownesses" of the body, the corporeal machine, itself (Speed and Politics 39-40).

Though Emerson's uncertainty about the machine is motivated by anxieties about the eroding place of the human being in a world increasingly populated by machines—anxieties that he had in common with later writers like Henry Adams and Lewis Mumford\footnote{In the famous chapter on "The Dynamo and the Virgin" from his 1918 autobiography, Adams questions whether the development of machine technology has produced any real development of human knowledge, suggesting that, for many Americans, the force of electricity is no less mystical and sublime, though a good deal less personal and more difficult to control, than the force of religious symbolism in previous ages (The Education of Henry Adams 1074-75). Mumford, though eager to note that machines are not inherently dangerous, notes in the first volume of The Myth of the Machine that machine culture provides ever more effective tools for the concentration of power in the hands of authoritarian institutions and that these tools, when orchestrated as vast projects or "megamachines," tend to dehumanize the human subjects they involve (321-322).}—the monism that he articulates is an important conceptual component in the later modernist discussions of speed, which take up problems that Emerson alludes to, but does not explore in “Power.” While he suggests that freedom (conceived as a power of achievement, a power to do or act) is non-contradictory with determinism, declaring that “[a]ll successful men have agreed in one thing—they were *causationists*,” he does not dwell long enough on these questions to satisfy the potential problems that emerge from the consideration of universal machinism (971, italics in the original). If all things are composed of an infinite number of machinic parts drawn into relation by some causal force, what becomes of the notion of freedom? Where is there agency and autonomy, or the power to act otherwise than as a cog in a grand machine? What is the
mechanism of differentiation and distinction that would prevent these parts from being subsumed into a single, undifferentiated unity? Is the “world-mill” a metaphor of a totalizing determinism, or can it be conceived in some way as a difference engine, a perpetual production of new capacities and relations among parts that are not bound within a closed whole? Whitman’s “To A Locomotive in Winter” (1876) can be profitably read as theorizing a universal machinism that uses the image of a particular machine, the speeding locomotive that is nevertheless bound to its tracks, to work through the twinned problems of freedom and differentiation that Emerson does not resolve in “Power.” As Emerson had remained ambivalent about what machinery entailed for human powers of self-making, it fell to Whitman, who is more often thought of as the arch-representative of the organic, holistic vision of America, to affirm the place of the machine in humanity, and of humanity in the machine. Indeed, decades after Whitman's death, Crane would credit him with this affirmation in his poem "Cape Hatteras": "Our Meistersinger, thou set breath in steel" (Complete Poems and Selected Letters 59). "To A Locomotive In Winter" is one of the most direct of Whitman's poetic engagements with machinery and it is here that he answers Emerson's challenge to "[let] machine confront machine" not so much by mechanizing the human, but by naturalizing the machine. In 1830, six years before Emerson secured his early reputation with Nature, there were only twenty-three miles of railroad operating in the United States; in 1840, two years before Whitman began his literary career with the novel Franklin Evans, there were 2,818 miles of rail. In 1860, when Emerson's The Conduct of Life and his writings on the machine reached the public, there were 30,626 miles of track; in 1890, two years before Whitman's death and the publication of the "deathbed edition" of his Leaves of Grass, the total rail mileage in the United States was an astonishing 166,703 miles (Pursell 78). It was in this context of the post-Civil War explosion of demand for rail transport that Whitman wrote "To
A Locomotive in Winter." Whitman, who declares in one of his inscriptions, "One's-Self I Sing," that "[n]ot physiognomy alone, nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse [but that] the Form complete is worthier far" (Complete Poetry and Selected Prose 165), invites the train engine in "To A Locomotive In Winter" to "[f]or once come serve the Muse and merge in verse" with the "pulse of the continent" (583). The same poet who celebrated the "procreant urge of the world" in 1855's "Song of Myself" (28) finds as much of that urge in the locomotive engine, which he declares to be the very "[t]ype of the modern—emblem of motion and power" (583). The artificial and natural worlds collide and blur together in Whitman's verse; he finds in the locomotive the same urge that propels the gregarious subject of "Song of Myself" into its litany of pantheistic conjunctions with all of its others. In "To A Locomotive In Winter," Whitman adds the machine to that litany and brings universal machinism into focus as a product of pantheistic thinking. Though Whitman himself remains committed to a vision of a naturalized God in and behind the machine, he points the way in "To A Locomotive In Winter" to a mode of thinking that will come to inform those who, like Adams in his Education, find less mystery, less force in the figure of a god than in the plethora of modern machinery. Whitmanian pantheism here anticipates the leap from deus ex machina to its obverse: no longer a god emergent from the machine, but a machine emerging from the place of gods, a place that, for Whitman, was already vacated of personal godhead, already flattened, as it had been for Spinoza, into the equivalency of deus sive natura, God or Nature.

Whitman both echoes the Emersonian line on the simplicity of the machine, that it does what it is determined to do, and declines to give an obvious human alternative. Instead of a complex human machine and a simple technical one, Whitman shows the locomotive as both

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152 Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the "deathbed" or 1892 edition of Whitman's works.
simple and complex, both efficient (it transports) and expressive (it transforms). On one hand, he celebrates the locomotive as though it were a natural object, removed from the human labour that produced it, addressing it as "[l]aw of [itself] complete, [its] own track firmly holding" (583). However, Whitman makes this celebration by echoing Emerson's statement that the machine, since it does not resist its fate, is often "more moral" than human beings. The locomotive is figured as its own law, as an entity that affirms its own determination, the necessity of the track it follows, and while the track itself might give away the existence of human beings who determine that law, that human presence remains strictly implicit. In fact, the closest we come to direct reference to a human presence other than the speaker's voice is the locomotive itself, whose sounds are anthropomorphized as "madly-whistled laughter," and which Whitman figures as "[f]ierce-throated beauty" (583). Early in the poem, the locomotive is figured as being dressed in a "panoply," a word that in its literal sense denoted the armour worn by the hoplites of the classical Greek city-states. Even the "knitted frame" of the locomotive suggests the musculature of a human body as readily as it does the coupled cars of the train, which follow the locomotive "merrily" down the track (583). This anthropomorphic line-crossing between humans and machines is certainly troubling in one sense, especially when Whitman describes the locomotive in panoply, given the tendency of later practitioners of the machine aesthetic such as Marinetti and his circle to anthropomorphize machines in order to imagine militarized hybrid-subjects, as in the pilot-plane machine in the aero-painter Tullio Crali's famous Nose Dive on the City. I do not believe that Whitman ever fully overcomes the threatening side of his own anthropomorphism, nor necessarily tries to do so.

For Emerson, the machine was both threatening and promising. On the one hand, machines could be seen as visible testaments to the powers that human beings discovered in
nature; on the other hand, supposed mastery over the machine often appeared as servitude to it, as in the case of mill workers who found themselves replaceable cogs in a vast industrial-economic machinery. What is at stake, then, when Whitman declines to observe an asymmetry in his poem between human and technical machines? He is certainly not ignorant of the potential dangers that machines and modern technology posed to human life, having witnessed the logistical mobilization and machine-aided violence of the Civil War. Though Whitman is relatively uncritical (at least in any direct way) of the dromological consequences of the blurring of humans and machines, his poem is not merely a proto-Futurist celebration of machinery. What seems in Whitman like a displacement of the problem of the human relationship to the machine in favour of the blurring of a speed-machine with its objective *milieu* is actually a strategic deployment of universal machinism to show that the machine is not a singular, novel source of power, but one of an infinity of manifestations of a monistic, indeterminate *potentia* whose effects (dangerous or otherwise) are determined by rhythms of speed and slowness. In this sense, Whitman’s poem is legible as an attempt to theorize rhythm as a means of making the machine livable, of producing a harmonious relation to it. The machine, he implies, is continuous with nature, not aberrant; its power is not uniquely threatening, but only one manifestation of an immanent *potentia* whose effects are not inherent or absolute but determined by relations or rhythms of motion and rest. The blurring of the locomotive with its *milieu*, with the landscape and its surroundings themselves, accumulates alongside the poem's sonic and rhythmic qualities. Here, Whitman anticipates the modernists in beginning to relate his universal machinism not only to the phenomenon of speed, but to rhythmic alternation and musicality. Speed and rhythm together supply the principle of differentiation that Emerson's machinism lacked.
To the question of how a poetics of the machine (and in later writers, of speed itself) can testify to the singularity of its subject's parts while showing them as part of a unity, Whitman finds himself on the side of the Spinozan answer of speed, and, more specifically, of the rhythmic relations of speed and slowness between moving bodies. While it is unclear if Whitman ever read Spinoza, the pantheistic, immanent conception of deity that appears throughout *Leaves of Grass* suggested a strong Spinozan resonance to many of Whitman’s early reviewers. An anonymous reviewer writing in the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, for instance, observed that “Whitman is a pantheist. Without, perhaps, ever having read Spinoza, he is a Spinozist” (“Notes on New Books” 38). This pantheistic Spinozism was a feature of a significant strain of Romantic writing (figures like Shelley and Goethe, for instance, were enthusiastic Spinozists) and would also have been available to Whitman through Emerson’s earlier writings; however, one of the interesting features of Whitman’s reflections on machinery and speed in “To A Locomotive in Winter” is that they show something more singular than pantheism—not merely a vision of immanent deity and deified nature, but a thoroughly blurred, machinic nature, an infinitude of parts bound to one another by a multiplicity of rhythms of motion and rest. The connections between musical rhythm, the train, and Spinozan machinism in Whitman’s poem are deeper than they might first appear. As the cultural critic Joel Dinerstein writes, "the train provided the foundational rhythms for moving forward and getting a move on, as well as for an almost obsessive need for power, rhythm, and locomotion—in other words, for the American tempo of life" (67). Dinerstein argues that these rhythms were put to the most striking use in African American music, especially by big band and swing jazz players between the World Wars, who, using the train as their sonic model, strove to preserve a place for the human in a machinic world, even if such a place was only available by incorporating human beings as parts
in a larger machine: the band (10-11). But what does this have to do with Whitman, who died well before the jazz age? The musical efforts to "swing the machine" (as Dinerstein puts it) are admittedly more advanced, more experimental, and arguably more successful than Whitman's poetic effort in "To A Locomotive In Winter", but the two are joined by a common interest in rhythm as the modulation of difference in repetition, of singular parts in an open, changing totality, and of the contours between the haecceities or becomings that constitute the provisional elements of a blurred scene. As Dinerstein notes, Western aesthetics and musicology had long tended to view rhythm as static repetition; in contrast, Whitman, like the jazz players who would emerge to prominence in the next century, finds in rhythm a principle of machinic difference (15). 153 Like the ragtime, jazz, and blues musicians who saw the train's steady but variegated hum and clatter as a model for their own syncopated rhythms, Whitman sees rhythm—in both an abstract and a poetic sense—as the promise of finding difference within repetition, and likewise of preserving the specificity of individual experiences (if not quite of individuals themselves) in an increasingly regular, routinized world of machines.

Equal portions of "To A Locomotive In Winter" are given over to the musicality and rhythmic nature of the eponymous object and descriptions of its physical characteristics. Musical and rhythmic references abound: the locomotive is "fierce-throated," its "pant and roar" are "metrical," and the train creates a "lawless music" that includes "trills of shrieks," a "warning

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153 Of course, many discourses about rhythm, from early discussions of the origins of prosody to musicological analyses of jazz, have tended to essentialize repetitive rhythmic figures as primitive, sexual, and, more often than not, as racially "other" (Dinerstein 15; Golston 32-33 and 53-56). See the introductions to Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine: Modernism, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars, and Golston, Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science. The tendency to racialize rhythm will be of more pressing importance to Hughes than Whitman, though the latter was often denounced by modernists for a supposed lack of discipline and order in his long line. Interestingly, Whitman is often figured as a sort of crude—that is, primitive—forefather, as in Ezra Pound's poem "A Pact," Yvor Winters's review of Crane's The Bridge (where the elder poet's supposed primitivism is used as a critical truncheon), and William Carlos Williams's essay "On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman."
ringing bell to sound its notes," and a "measur'd dual throbbing [...] and beat convulsive" as it rolls down the track with "madly-whistled laughter" (583). But what becomes of the poetic sense of rhythm in a poem written in Whitman's typical long-line free verse? In a late essay, "On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman," William Carlos Williams decries Whitman's fixation on "the abstract idea of freedom," which Williams claims was "an idea lethal to all order, particularly to that order which has to do with the poem"(339). Though Williams concedes that Whitman was "on the right track," he is uncharitable, for it is precisely a sort of order that Whitman seeks in "To A Locomotive in Winter" through lines that owe their rhythm more to their rhetoric than to their meter (339). Whitman's favoured device is anaphora, the repetition of a phrase at the beginning of each line. Here, though, the anaphoras not only sow the expectation of the repeated phrase, but simulates what Dinerstein, in the context of jazz onomatopoeia of train noises, calls "the locomotive ball of sound." Dinerstein names three parts of this jazz motif: first, the "hard steam-breathing" of the train picking up speed as it prepares to leave a station; second, the period of acceleration in which the tempo builds and train can be imagined to pick up speed; finally, the full speed of the train "moving under its own power" (71). In a rough sense, Whitman's anaphoras regulate a similar three-part movement in the poem; though he is obviously not operating in the same context as the jazz musicians who would later take up the train motif, the sound of the train as it passed from its urban terminal into the countryside was a recognizable and widely shared part of the wider cultural experience of the locomotive in the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth (Dinerstein 66-67). If we follow the path of Whitman's rhetorical regulation, we can see that while the anthropomorphic hybridity of the human and machine is relatively consistent across the poem, it is only when Whitman’s rhetoric marks out the accumulation of speed that there is a more general, comprehensive blurring of the humanized
machine into its *milieu*. In other words, there is only anthropomorphism, and not blur, until there is some rhythmic demarcation of speed. The poem opens with a short line, "Thee for my recitative," at once naming the locomotive and capturing the sudden jolt of the firing engine, and is followed up by two longer, similarly anaphoric lines: "Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day declining, / Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive" (583). We remain in the first stage of "hard steam-breathing," as the two longer lines unfurl slowly. Note the Latinate syntax, which suspends the verbal sense of the line as long as possible: we accumulate nouns (the snow, the winter-day; the "measur'd" dual throbbing and the beat) until we can pair the nouns to their verbal sense at the end of the line (declining and, implicitly, convulsing). The effect is of two broad senses of rhythm. Think of them as the "long sense" of the whole line, or of the time we wait in order to piece together the sense of the line as a whole, and the "short sense" of the line as Whitman punctuates it, with the commas of the second line setting off "the snow" and marking out a pause that has no parallel in the third line.

While the long sense marks a gradually changing whole that has to be waited out, the short sense marks the local texture or modulations of that whole, the various layers of syncopated rhythm that pass beneath the overall sense of the rhythm. In the third line, instead of commas, the syncopations anticipate a shift in phase from one anaphora to another, while at the same time producing a quick, sudden series of repeated sounds that will be stretched over a much longer interval in the lines to come: "Thee in thy [...] thy [...] thy." In this first stage of the "locomotive ball of sound," Whitman frames the locomotive first in isolation as the object of the poem, then against the distinct backdrop of the snow, the storm, and the winter's day, and lastly in relation to its physical appearance (its panoply) and the rhythms it produces (the dual throbbing and the beat).
As the poem moves into the second anaphoric phase (which overlaps and layers over the second in line three but begins in its own right in line four), Whitman focuses on the physical characteristics and, occasionally, the sound of the locomotive. The sequence from lines four to eleven begins all but one line with "Thy": "Thy black cylindric body [...] Thy ponderous side-bars [...] Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar [...] Thy great protruding head-light [...] Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants [...] The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack [...] Thy knitted body [...] Thy train of cars" (583, emphasis mine). These are all long lines, and while the (mostly) regular anaphoras impart a consistency, the sense almost of a cruising speed, an even tempo, the lines are sped along by their catalogue quality, by the proliferation of commas and by the repetition of conjunctions that occur internally in the lines, at a greater frequency than the repetition of the anaphoric "Thy." This second stage conveys the feeling of gradually building speed through this variation of rhythms and the alternation of quick repetitions inside long lines with the slower, awaited repetitions at the beginning of the lines. The ninth line of the poem, which I still place in this second phase and quote above in italics, breaks the consistency of the anaphora. This breakage anticipates the third phase (just as the second phase overlapped with the first in line three) and marks the point at which the machine and its surroundings begin to blur. The locomotive begins the poem as an object inside of, but separate from, the storm and the snow; both are distinguished by their own particular movements, which is to say that the moving train and the storm are both haecceities (not objects as such, but becoming-objects, processes in motion). By the ninth line, the driving winter storm makes an uncanny return in the "dense and murky clouds"; before we realize the clouds are, in fact, the steam and smoke pouring from the locomotive's smokestack, and before we can be sure that they are the same as the "floating vapor-pennants" of the previous line (which notably preserves the
second-phase anaphora and figures the smoke in a way that marks it as belonging definitively to the train), we might well mistake the density and murkiness of the clouds as a reference to the visually opaque snow storm. In other words, the poem begins to destabilize our understanding of the train and its surroundings as being clearly defined and separate entities.

The final phase of the poem is not anaphoric and follows from line twelve to the end, spanning the end of the first stanza and the entirety of the second; it opens with a line that suggests both the alternating rhythms of the previous two phases and a sudden acceleration, in seeming contradiction of its description of the train's steady motion: "Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering" (583). Though Whitman's verse is seldom driven by self-conscious meter, this transitional line is particularly interesting to scan. Read one way, it is a simple fifteen-syllable iambic line with a "feminine" or unstressed ending; however, Whitman's punctuation sets off the final phrase—"yet steadily careering"—for special attention, coming as it does after the quick alliterative succession of "now swift, now slack." The final words suggest the rollick and clatter of the train rolling down a stretch of track and while the line itself is steadily iambic, the phrase "steadily careering" stands out as an unusual measure in a poem that we are not primed to read as primarily metrical, since the rhetorical constructions only occasionally coincide with a regular meter. If we take this phrase in isolation, or if we read it "against the grain" of its iambic line, "steadily" appears as a cretic foot and "careering" as an amphibrach. The former follows the pattern stressed-unstressed-stress, while the latter follows the pattern unstressed-stressed-unstressed; in other words, the transitional line in the final phase of Whitman's poem ends with two long feet, one the inversion of the other, which we might read as a jump or stutter, the final phase of the "locomotive ball of sound," in which the train finishes accelerating and launches into maximum speed. Although the line notes the steadiness of the
locomotive's speed, it does so at the precise moment that the rhetorical repetitions give way to Whitman's invocation to the Muse to allow the locomotive and the "pulse of the continent" to "merge in verse, even as here I see thee, / With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow" (583). Implicitly, to merge with the pulse of the continent is to merge with the wind and the snow that blows according to that pulse, for the rhythm of the locomotive to begin blurring it into the universal rhythm that hums and pulses beneath every contour of the track. At this point where the rhythmic manifestation of the locomotive's building speed comes into full force, in the second stanza, the interplay of order and disorder, sameness and difference, begins irrupting into the poem. As the locomotive rolls through the landscape, its whistle echoes and rumbles "like an earth-quake" and its "trills of shrieks [are] by rocks and hills return'd," as though the rhythms that pass through the locomotive are the very same that vibrate through the earth; there is a sympathy, a vital relation, that passes between the elements of the train and those of its material milieu: not only is the rhythm of the train echoed in the rhythm of the earth, but both rhythms blend together, the former a modulation of the latter. Nevertheless, as near as Whitman comes to presenting a fully blurred world whose monism, fluidity, and continuity are revealed by speed, it is important to note that the blur he captures does not fulfil that tendency. Whitman’s locomotive blurs with its milieu, but it does not undergo the kinds of radical transformations that Crane’s images do in “Cape Hatteras.” For instance, while Whitman describes the locomotive in terms that evoke an armoured knight flying a standard (it is in “panoply” and trails “vapor-pennants”), Crane describes airplanes and dirigibles in more jarring terms, alternately as amphibious dragon-spawn, as insects, and “Cetus-like” sea monsters (Whitman 583; Crane 56-57). In Crane’s telling, speed not only blurs the object with its milieu, but deforms, differs, multiplies, and hybridizes it. As formative as the experience of the locomotive in Whitman’s age was for future
representations of the experience of speed, that experience remains below the radical threshold of the speeds of later machinic apparatuses, from airplanes and cinematic projectors and the bebop ensemble.

In the context of these beginnings of the blur of speed in the poem, we can gain some vantage on a pressing concern of these early figurations of blur—the problem of freedom, or the relative autonomy of those forms and entities experiencing blur. In Whitman, this problem looms in the interpretive crux of the seeming contradiction between the locomotive's "lawless music" and the fact that it is, nevertheless, "[l]aw of [itself] complete, [its] own track firmly holding" (583). Two plausible propositions come to mind about this passage: firstly, that the lawlessness of the music and the self-law of the locomotive are unrelated, and present in the poem merely to contrast the seemingly chaotic auditory nature of the train with its orderly progression along the track; or, secondly, that Whitman suggests an outright equivalency between the lawless music and the train that is law to itself (a self-conscious subversion of the distinction between law and lawlessness). If the interplay of law and lawlessness were merely contrastive, one would have to dismiss the efforts Whitman takes in the previous stanza to weave together the descriptions of the train's physical characteristics with its auditory ones, to depict the locomotive's sounds as inseparable from its physical presence. On the other hand, to read the passage as implying a collapse between law and lawlessness is to miss the Emersonian sub-text in Whitman's treatment of the machine. The locomotive is its own law only in the sense that, for Emerson, the machine could be more moral than a human being: it affirms the necessity of its own fate (the track that it must follow) and does so fully, freely, in affirming the only choice available to it, since its choices are restricted by its surroundings and by what conditions them from without. As a machine that can "choose" only what functions it is determined to perform (it chooses by default,
by lacking any outside determination to choose otherwise), the locomotive's choice of law becomes wholly coincident with the law it has no choice but to follow. But then again, if the machine's freedom is, in this Emersonian sense, the fact that it cannot be troubled by the illusion of freedom, it is not clear why the machine should be celebrated and valorized as Whitman does. Its freedom reads dangerously like quietism or complacency. Further still, this freedom seems wholly to erase the presence of the human beings who determine the machine by laying its tracks; by extension, the poem does not and cannot answer the question of what such a determinism means for these erased human agents. Whitman does not obviously appeal to Emerson's distinction between the complex human machinery and the simplicity of technical machines, but one suspects this is because the human has been swept up into the image of the train. The elision or blurring together of the locomotive and its surroundings, and more problematically of the locomotive and its passengers, conductors, and producers, presents a major and perhaps unresolved dilemma for the question of what it means to be free in modernity.

The lawlessness of the locomotive's music offers something of a conceptual opening of this problematic, albeit it is one that Whitman does not fully develop. If speed is, as I have argued, a power of the transformation and, at one extreme, the blurring of bodies, then rhythm is the structure of speed (or speed as structure, as a relation of motion and rest). Rhythm cannot be lawless, since it is, by definition, the experience of a structure, an identifiable "law" of relations between various speeds. What would a "lawless music" really be? Firstly, it would be a music without rhythm, a speed without limit: pure difference, but a difference understood as being in

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154 The logic here, likely coming as it does from Emerson (cf. "Fate," for example), belongs to a long tradition of determinist thinking that has some of its deepest roots in the philosophy of the Greco-Roman Stoics (for instance, see Epictetus, the Discourses and the Enchiridion, and the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius). Beginning from the denial of free will, the Stoics contended that real freedom consisted not in being able to do or choose particular actions, but in having free control of one's reactions to external necessities.
and of itself, without any extrinsic or intrinsic relations. If this is the case, then by "lawless music" Whitman cannot mean the sounds that he has gone to such lengths, in the previous stanza, to frame as "metrical" and "measur'd." If the locomotive is law unto itself because it follows its own track, because it affirms its determining causes, then the music of the locomotive can be lawless because it is not determined by anything; we might think of it in Spinozan terms as music in potentia, or in Deleuze's parlance as virtual music, as the unformed, latent power that is available to be actualized in any number of rhythms. This is no longer the music of non-relation, absolute unto itself, but the vital animating force that is not rhythm, but which rhythm makes evident. When Whitman writes that the train's music is lawless, he does not mean that the "measur'd beat" that it emits is lawless, but that that beat presupposes a lawlessness, an immanent music, that it can "beat out" in rhythm. In other words, law, structure, determination, and rhythm are all second-order phenomena to this lawless music, but are not, for all that, outside of it—the lawless music is immanent to rhythmic laws, to meters and measure; the chaotic nature of unshaped speed is utterly immanent to everything that it manifests. Thus, we can see in Whitman that law is not the opposite of lawlessness, but that law is, on the contrary, the livable, operative expression of an a priori lawlessness. At this trouble-spot of the poem, where the beginnings of blur have set in between the locomotive and the milieu, there is a more profound blurring already at work between the music of everything, in which the train is manifest, and the music of something, through which the train expresses or actualizes one set of modes, one modal machine, of the universal, abstract machine that makes it possible. The freedom of the train is necessarily restricted, but also shaped, made possible, by any number of other concrete machines that mediate between it and the abstract "machine" of the lawless music. The freedom of the locomotive on its track is not, in the end, the mystical freedom of the law-
unto-itself, but the poem's own rhythm. By expressing the locomotive's approach toward speed in rhythmic and rhetorical mediation, in presenting the "locomotive ball of sound," Whitman not only uses rhythm as the means to show that the locomotive is inextricable from its spatial milieu (that it blurs with the landscape), but that its freedom is equally determined by its causal milieu, by a variety of "rhythms" of its own: if it is rhythmically blurred into other objects, it equally suggests that objects embody their own causes, the rhythms that structure them, so that the human beings who are otherwise elided from the poem appear as what must be presumed in order to account for the structure of the locomotive (those whose labour built the track and the train itself). The poem deploys rhythm both to show how blur operates in the text itself, and at the same time to imply that what may be taken for granted in the poem (that the locomotive is somehow causa sui, and somehow liberating) may itself be a product of blur. Between absolute difference and absolute repetition, between speed and slowness, utter continuity and the isolated discretion of forms, it is only rhythm that shows them as blurred, and only rhythm that makes that blur livable, controllable, and comprehensible.

III. "Eyes bicarbonated white by speed": Blur and The Bridge

Between Whitman's death in 1892 and Crane's publication of The Bridge with Liveright in 1930, the nature of the experience of speed in America had changed drastically. As fundamental as it had been to shaping early perceptions of movement at speed, the locomotive was no longer the very "[t]ype of the modern" as it had been for Whitman; though the train did not cede its place as a vital piece of American economic and transportation infrastructure, it had been eclipsed as the symbol of machinic speed by technologies that opened new vectors and new terrain for personal experiences of speeds that were unheard of in the previous century. The steady increase in the availability of mass-produced automobiles was one side of this revolution,
and while the automobile did not offer greater speeds than the train, it did offer individual drivers greater control over a more immediate and less restricted experience of speed. Where the train subjected passengers to the passive experience of a speed that was nominally under the control of a conductor whose direction was itself bound to the tracks (a situation that Whitman found so poetically suggestive in "To A Locomotive In Winter"), the automobile allowed individual drivers the relative freedom to range wherever their vehicles would allow them, or at least wherever roads would allow their vehicles. Ironically, though the automobile granted individual drivers the power to move at practically uncontrollable speeds, it also allowed them a sense of mastery over their own speeds, which were no longer bound either to railroad track or to the comparatively slow pace of human or animal locomotion. Of course, this sense of mastery was quite often mistaken and blurred rapidly into hubris; as Virilio frequently cautions, the invention of the car was also the invention of the car accident (*Politics of the Very Worst* 89). At the same time that individuals were being granted access to and control over the means of high speed, the very magnitude of the speeds produced by those means made them increasingly difficult to control. As true as this situation was of automobiles, it was nowhere more clearly evident than in the burgeoning field of aviation, where the vector of speed was radically deterritorialized and intensified: cars were restricted to roads, navigable open spaces, and the contours of the earth, while aircraft, which developed rapidly after the Wright brothers' first powered heavier-than-air flight in 1903, could maneuver in the unrestricted air. Aircraft were also becoming more and more integrated into American infrastructure, from the proliferation of domestic air transportation routes, of which there were already eighty-four in 1929, to the establishment of an air mail service that, beginning with a New York to Washington D. C. route in 1918, included regular cross-continent flights from New York to San Francisco in the span of only six years.
(Pursell, *The Machine in America* 236). However, while the automobile presented the risk of a verging-on-uncontrollable speed, these speeds tended to be restricted by the choreography of street traffic, whereas as aviation presented the threat of uncontrollable speed loosing itself from any direction at all. If the car invented the car accident, the airplane invented the modern iteration of the fall of Icarus: flight without control, speed without power, and blur taken to the destructive extreme of annihilation. It was in this context that Crane made the motif of flight a central part of *The Bridge*, and in which he uses flight—at first in the proem, "To Brooklyn Bridge," but more directly in the aviation poem "Cape Hatteras"—as a means to explore some of the central problems of the experience of speed as blur: the inextricability of freedom from determination, the accumulation of speed-power, and the looming threat that such an accumulation might threaten the annihilation of one striving to control it.

*The Bridge* is interesting not only because it proceeds from an acceptance of the implicit monistic machinism in Emerson and Whitman, but because Crane’s machinic poetics of blur draws on a diversity of inspirations, from relativity, to cinema, to aviation. As I suggest above, this machinism, taken to its extremity, results in a monism quite like Spinoza’s, which Deleuze identifies as a kind of universal machinism. Though Crane did read Spinoza first-hand, he did not do so until 1931, the year after *The Bridge* went to print; however, given the blossoming of interest in Spinoza among popular modernist philosophers like Bergson and Crane’s own devotion to Whitman, who, as I note earlier, was readily legible as being, in a loose sense, a “Spinozist,” it is conceivable that Crane was already aware of the broad outlines of Spinozism in

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155 Cf. Susan McCabe’s *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*. McCabe identifies a literary "tradition' of openness to cinematic possibilities for enacting new forms of embodiment" that includes Williams, Gertrude Stein, H. D., and Marianne Moore, and which could well be extended to include Crane, who McCabe mentions *in passim*, and Hughes, whose "cinematic" poetry was written outside of the time-frame of McCabe's study (17).
the 1920s. He would almost certainly have also heard Spinoza’s name in these years in association with Einstein, who admired Spinoza and was then at the height of his celebrity. In fact, when Crane reports on his recent reading to Solomon Grunberg in a 1931 letter, it is as “Einstein’s grandpop” that he describes Spinoza (O My Land, My Friends 442). As I note in my introduction, Crane tacitly recognized a fact that had been observed by Viscount Haldane in an introduction to Alexander’s lecture on Spinoza and space-time: “Spinozism gets a fresh significance in the new atmosphere of Relativity,” for which Einstein’s name was a customary stand-in (11). Crane’s recognition of a family resemblance between what he knew of Einsteinian relativity and Spinozan monism is unsurprising if we observe that he had already been working toward a blurred or relativized poetics of monism in The Bridge. This monism takes the form of a universal machinism in which the only substance is speed, in which bodies are composed of an infinitude of various powers-of-acting that are composed or individuated in certain ways by the various and differential intensities of their speeds—that is, by their determinate rhythms. Crane’s poetry, also taking inspiration from the technology of the cinema, in which static frames produce a moving, living world when projected at speed, moves beyond the romantic organicism that modernism is often supposed to have rejected, but not by dismissing its monism—rather, he transforms it into an organicism that lacks the transcendence of the organic unity, a holism of infinite parts and only provisional wholes.

Like Hughes in Montage of a Dream Deferred, Crane uses the techniques and experiences made possible by the movie camera on one hand, and the film projector on the other, to produce a poetry that is not merely about the machine, but of it. In his 1959 mock-manifesto "Personism," Frank O'Hara declares (perhaps with a wink) that "only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies" (498). Ironic or otherwise, there is a
certain wisdom in O'Hara's comment in speaking of Crane as a poet whose poems vie with the movies. In the poems of *The Bridge*, and especially in "Cape Hatteras," the poetry of blur comes into its own as a mode where discrete images melt into one another and where seemingly separate thoughts radically implicate themselves in one another like the distinct frames of a montage, forming perceptual continuities that are produced by imbuing discontinuous elements with rapid speed. Crane's poetry reflects the convergence of the technologies of flight and cinema in the early twentieth century, which Virilio describes in *War and Cinema*: "At the turn of the century, cinema and aviation seemed to form a single moment. By 1914, aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records [...] it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of seeing" (22). Thus, much of what has long been viewed as puzzling, obscure, or hyperbolic in Crane's poetry—especially in a poem as self-consciously excessive and flamboyant as "Cape Hatteras"—can be illuminated by thinking of his poetry in terms of the devices and tropes of the cinema that developed in his lifetime: the blurring of temporal elements, the mobility of the camera-eye that corresponds to so many of Crane's anonymous, de-subjectivized speakers, and the use of rapid juxtapositions between images to suggest a montage-like continuity between otherwise distinct scenes (34). On the one hand, when Crane writes of aviation, his imagery becomes so effusive, so symbolically flighty as it were, that his language indeed "verges on absurdity," as Brian Reed observes of "Cape Hatteras" (202). But for all that, Crane is not being undisciplined. While Tichi argues that the modernist writer in the age of "gear and girder" technology became a designer of the poem-machine, it is truer of Crane that the poet was to be a pilot of the word, subjected at every turn to the exaggerated sensations
and giddy thrill of the speeds embodied in combination of words. If Crane's flight poetry risks absurdity, it is only as the appropriate poetic response to the experience of absurdly high speeds. As Duffy reminds us, vision at speed is vision in which there can be no "critical distance," no objective vantage point of the moving observer on the object of vision, but only an uncertain and continuous approach (51-52).

If Crane's poetry seldom claims to be a precise, “accurate,” or objective description of a phenomenon from on high, if its supposedly prophetic characters and subjects are so often figured as blind, like the pilot in "Cape Hatteras" whose very eyes are "bicarbonated white by speed" (57), it is because Crane strives to produce a poetry that also expresses the conditions of cinema. Thus, as John T. Irwin has pointed out, Crane announces the cinema motif in "To Brooklyn Bridge" with a curious modern retelling of Plato's allegory of the cave: "I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights / With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again, / Foretold to other eyes on the same screen" (33). In The Republic, Plato gives the allegory as a demonstration of his theory of education, and more broadly of the theory of forms: those who do not engage in philosophical inquiry are like prisoners living in chains in a cave, facing its wall, who see objects only as they are reflected onto that wall from behind them; the philosopher, on the other hand, is not chained, and understands that the images on the wall are only second-order, that they are the shadows of objects being projected as they pass in front of a fire higher in the cave. Plato's philosopher knows that material things are not what they appear to be but are only projections of the higher

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156 In a brief article on Crane's relationship to the "Verticalist" surrealism of transition magazine founder Eugene Jolas, L. S. Dembo observes that the "sufferings of the aviator, the mystic, and the poet are either analogous or identical" in Crane's flight poems.

157 All references to Crane's poetry are to the Library of America's Hart Crane: Complete Poems and Selected Letters.
reality of the ideal forms. The way we read Crane's allusion to the allegory will bear notably on how we read the relation between cinema and his poetry. Irwin argues that Crane's stanza in "To Brooklyn Bridge" characterizes cinema as "an inauthentic visionary medium in American life in contrast to the prophetic vision of national origin symbolized by the dawn-illuminated arc of the bridge" (87). Though Irwin is typically an excellent and imaginative critic of Crane's work, I think this reading has notable flaws, not least because it suggests a hierarchy in Crane's view between the "false visionary medium" of cinema and the "prophetic vision" of his own poetry; how could this be true of a poet whose first collection, White Buildings, contained a fond homage to Charlie Chaplin's The Kid ("Chaplinesque")? Indeed, this poet who sees the cinema as a mere simulacrum of the visionary ambitions of poetry would be unrecognizable to the one who wrote in a 1921 letter that he felt "moved to put Chaplin with the poets (of today)" and who declared in the same letter that Chaplin, "especially in The Kid, made me feel myself, as a poet, as being 'in the same boat' with him" (70).158 Further still, Crane repeatedly sought employment as a script writer in the film industry throughout the 1920s (Mariani 39, 46-47, 298). Although nothing significant came from these efforts, the fact that Crane sought script-writing work so consistently does not support Irwin's reading of the cinema section in "To Brooklyn Bridge" as pejorative; if anything, Crane saw the movies as a fascinating marriage of the literary or artistic with the popular, and one that could be as fulfilling as the best of modern poetry.

Where Irwin implies an antagonism between cinema and poetry in Crane's view, or at least an ordering of the former as less capable of delivering the necessary restorative vision than poetry, I see an alliance that speaks directly to how Crane will treat speed. Notably, the cinema is

158 All citations of Crane’s letters refer to Langdon Hammer and Brom Weber’s O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane.
not present in "To Brooklyn Bridge" except in the parenthesis of the speaker's thought: the speaker, who manifests rather jarringly, and for the first time, in the first-person perspective, considers the cinema first as an illusion, or sleight, then as a massive center of attention that pulls multitudes together, and finally as a figure of prophecy, of scenes "foretold" to many eyes, on the condition that they witness it on the same screen. I read the speaker in this stanza as a stand-in for the poet, considering the effects of cinema as a resource upon which poetry might draw, and thus establishing the cinematic reference in the proem as a kind of conceptual frame for the development of the poetic voice; in other words, Crane presents the cinema not to dismiss it, but to signal that he intends to assimilate its method of always treating perception as perception-at-speed into his own poetry. In this respect, it is important that the speaker considers the cinema as a speed technology and emphasizes that it instantiates a particular rhythm in the multitudes that observe it. The scene toward which the multitudes bend flashes with the unfathomable speed of the film projector, which, by subjecting individual frames to a relatively stable speed, a rhythmic blur, produces a living, moving image; the frames are made to resonate together in the single moving image, transforming them from singular objects into a panorama, a celluloid milieu. The cinema not only blurs its frames into scenes, but it also blurs its audience. The multitudes are instantiated as such by a plural act of witnessing (a perception that is rooted in any number of locations in the theatre, which sees the image from any number of points) that is nevertheless anchored on a single screen. The multitudes never see beyond this screen (which is "never disclosed"), but they return—even "hasten"—to it again and again. In their return, the audience members cease to be the loose, untethered plurality of various people in various places, and become instead the singular plurality of the "multitudes" whose interface and relation to one another depends, in a certain sense, on their inhabiting a single world, or viewing a single screen.
What moves the individual in the theatre from mere individuality to experiencing a shared scene (even if the tenor and tone of the experience inevitably differ)? It is nothing more than speed, which blurs the witnessing individual into a hazy, uncertainly delineated relation with its surroundings. With that in mind, that which is "foretold to other eyes" on this one screen is the very possibility of such blurring, such falling into uncertain relation, even if that relation, like the cinema scene, would appear as a series of "panoramic sleights" if it were not projected at such speed.

It is the cinematic and fantastic blurring of past and present that Crane pursues as one of the major themes of The Bridge, from "Cape Hatteras," which is both a history of aviation and an effort to recuperate Whitman’s monistic and continuist vision of America for twentieth-century modernity, to the "Powhatan's Daughter" movement, which imagines a mythic union and reconciliation of America's aboriginal history to its colonized, Europeanized present. However, the blurring by speed that Crane attempts most specifically in "Cape Hatteras" is not strictly temporal and depends equally on showing speed as both a transformative and a deformative power, which Crane presents more fully than Whitman had in his earlier efforts. The connection of spatio-temporal blurring with flight and cinematic vision is given as a kind of anticipatory leitmotif in a cluster of images from "To Brooklyn Bridge," which opens with the image of a gull flying from the direction of the East River toward the Upper New York Bay: "How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest / The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him, / Shedding white rings of tumult, building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty" (33). Crane emphasizes the flexible mobility of the gull (its wings dip and pivot it in the three dimensions of the air) and the new perspectives unfurled on the horizon by the speed of the gull (the Statue of Liberty looms into view on the skyline beyond the waters "chained" by the bridge). However, the artful
convolution of Crane's syntax introduces a sense of groundlessness and uncertainty into the poem. The phrase "chill from his rippling rest" seems at first glance to be an appositive description of the dawns, but refers instead to the gull, which we encounter first only through the mediation of a possessive pronoun. The phrase anticipates the arrival of a subject who has not yet been introduced, but who emerges rather fleetingly from the syntactically blurred lines. If one untangled and parsed the essential sense of the opening stanza, it would read something like the following: How many dawns will the seagull's wings dip and pivot him, bringing the Statue of Liberty into view over the bay. It is the compression of Crane's language, and the syntactic displacement of its subject, that gives the puzzling sense that the dawns, the gull, and the statue emerge out of one another, as though continuous with one another. The Statue of Liberty is not merely brought into perspective by the gull, but seemingly built by it; it is the speed gathered in the dips and pivots of the gull's flight that makes the deceptive, quasi-magical experience of the monument emerging out of the horizon possible. Although "To Brooklyn Bridge" does not develop the theme of speed (that task will be left to "Cape Hatteras"), it does establish here the theme of speed as a power that imbues objects with fluidity: the speed-perspective of the gull invests the horizon with a monistic valence as the limit-point beyond which vision can never reach, but one from which everything necessarily emerges, or has already emerged. If viewed at low speed, the horizon merely represents the limit of a stable, relatively unmoving world; if viewed at high speeds (and the gull, even if it merely glides, surpasses the speed of pedestrians on the street) and from an elevated vantage point, the horizon becomes a moving veil of haecceities—the locus of blur, where a virtual potency (the unspecified content of the beyond that the horizon necessarily presupposes) finds itself in the process of actualizing into discrete
objects. If we were to imagine this horizon in the context of the cinematic perception of the cinema stanza, we can see that the horizon is akin to the movie screen, insofar as both designate the undisclosable place where the rhythms and blur of speed unfold. The object-world that emerges from the horizon or the screen remains fluid as long as the gull maintains the speed of flight; we can imagine the Statue of Liberty rising up, into full view, and receding again as the gull passes by it, or expanding so much as the bird perches upon it that it ceases to be recognizable as a singular object at all, but instead becomes a milieu of its own. It is the pace, the regulation, or rather the rhythm of the gull's speed as it approaches the horizon that will determine what the emergent objects become as it draws nearer to them.

Nowhere in The Bridge is Crane's poetics of blur more thoroughly developed or more emphasized than in "Cape Hatteras," a poem that doubles as a sentimental hymn and homage to Whitman and a history of heavier-than-air flight. Through allusions to Whitman's works, from "Song of the Open Road" and "Prayer of Columbus" to "Recorders Ages Hence," Crane sets the elder poet up not only as a precursor for the broader project of The Bridge (the aesthetic expression of the potency and fluidity of an America conceived less as a nation-state than as a poiesis), but as a direct precursor for the self-consciously modern and technological poetry that Crane writes in "Cape Hatteras." Though I am interested more specifically here in Crane's development of the poetics of speed that I have traced through Whitman's "To a Locomotive in Winter," it is worth saying that Crane's unambiguous celebration of Whitman's legacy was an

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159 Kern describes the speed-extremities of blur when he notes that the perspective from low speed gives a fragmented world (that is, one of discrete, sharply delineated objects), whereas the perspective from high speed gives one of fluidity (118). It is worth emphasizing, though, that the option is never between an unblurred discontinuity and a blurry continuity; on the contrary, blur is properly the more profound continuity that subsists beneath any substrate of appearances. Blur is not a matter of absolute speeds, but of relative or differential speed, and one need not see the city through a speeding automobile to see it blur together; what appear as delineated objects to a walker may well dissolve into an indistinct milieu for the runner.
exceptional one in an age whose poetic luminaries tended to approach this progenitor cautiously, if at all (even would-be acolytes like Williams borrowed from Whitman only cautiously and selectively). However, it is on this axis, as one who celebrated Whitman before it was wholly safe to do so, that Crane's poetry can be spoken of alongside that of Hughes, who, though animated by a very different sense of the possibilities of machinic modernity, similarly developed his poetic project, as least in part, through dialogue with Whitman (poems like "I, Too" and "Theme for English B" are, like much of The Bridge, legible as attempts to reconcile Whitman's America with that of a problematic and challenging modernity).

Though there are many ways to frame the Whitman apotheosis in "Cape Hatteras," the sense that most interests me is the figuration of Whitman as the "Meistersinger" who "set breath in steel" (59)—the prophetic figure who demonstrated in poems like "To A Locomotive in Winter" that it was possible to devise, through poetry, a livable relation to a perilously accelerating world. Like Whitman, Crane sees both the danger and the enlivening potency of the new speed technologies of his day and seeks a "rhythm" with which to pacify this thoroughly ambivalent power of transformation. But unlike Whitman's locomotive, Crane's airplane offers speed at a whole other level of magnitude, and where the elder poet could conceive of speed as producing a sort of sympathy between passenger-subjects and object-milieux, he could not imagine a speed so profound as to challenge the very metaphysics of cause. For Whitman, speed revealed the reciprocal and immanent nature of causality; for Crane, extreme speed poses the dual threat and promise of a world made liquid, where the threshold between actual, discrete forms and fluid virtual ones becomes increasingly unstable. Margaret Dickie Uroff observes how Crane relies through The Bridge on symbols of transportation to evoke a world of constant movement, where "the solidarity of the world is dispersed, and a new fluid perception of time
and space arises" (117). We might add that it is not simply the imagery of transportation that drives Crane to this point, but the thematic of speed. One can read in Crane the affirmation of one of Virilio's declaration that, in the age of acceleration, "the first product of consciousness would be its own speed in its distance of time, speed would be the causal idea, the idea before the idea" (The Aesthetics of Disappearance 14, emphasis mine). It is not that speed reveals the mutual causal implication of objects and milieux, as in Whitman, but that speed itself has become causal. Speed melts objects into backgrounds, de-forms consciousness and recomposes it as an unstable, mutable composite in which there are neither solid objects nor a pure, detached formlessness, but only what Deleuze, speaking of cinema, calls "liquid perception," where perception hovers on the unstable border of becoming, where solid, determinate objects distort, always on the verge of becoming radically deterritorialized or "gaseous," but never quite crossing the threshold (Cinema I: The Movement-Image 80). In the cinematic fixation on water, he says, there is a "clairvoyant function [...] as if perception enjoyed a scope and interaction, a truth which it did not have on land" (79). In the specific conditions of cinema, this clairvoyance is a result of the hazy and mediate place that liquid perception occupies between solid objects and a fully dissolved milieu: in order to show a difference or change of state in a solid object, it must first pass back toward the formless abstraction of the gaseous. Since cinema is for Deleuze first an art of movement (that is, of difference), it is the "future" of its solid objects to move toward this gaseous state that enables them to change.

While Deleuze does not link this liquid cinematic perception or its supposedly clairvoyant function explicitly to speed, Crane does. The speaker exclaims how the pilot figure's "stilly eyes partake / What alcohol of space," suggesting that space has taken on not only a liquid quality, but an intoxicating, consciousness-altering one (57). The trope of intoxicated insight, or
of drunkenness as a route to visionary or prophetic experience, is a favourite one of Crane's: in "The Wine Menagerie," a notable poem from 1926's *White Buildings*, we are told that "wine redeems the sight" and that "[w]ine talons / Build freedom up about [the speaker]," while the speaker incites an interlocutor in part three of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" to "[d]elve upward for the new and scattered wine, / O brother-thief of time, that we recall" (17, 23). We should not be surprised to find Crane pursuing an analogue of Deleuze's clairvoyant function of liquid perception in the speed-intoxicated "alcohol of space" in "Cape Hatteras." The speaker marvels as the "[s]tars scribble on our eyes the frosty sagas, / The gleaming cantos of unvanquished space," the frost indicating a solid not yet accessible, not yet liquefied by the speed of modernity, a promise not yet deliverable, but latent in the mechanical speed of the airplane (56). The "star-glistered salver of infinity, / The circle, blind crucible of endless space, / Is sluiced by motion,—subjugated never" (55). Here, the "salver" or healer of infinity, the star-lit circle, is the earth; but the circle is itself a symbol of infinity—we are speaking of one and the same object, which is to say that infinity solves itself, that the recuperation of a livable relation to the world of rapidity will not come from some transcendent without, but from within that very world. A crucible, in this context, is a device for producing objects with the application of heat (Tapper 166). More specifically, a crucible is typically used to melt down and fuse metals; hence, from the perspective of speed (which presupposes the heat of the combustion engine, of the combustion in the "astral core," and of the human "engine in a cloud" that appear later), the world becomes molten or liquid—blurred together. But this is not a molten oneness where the difference between objects is subsumed; on the contrary, this is a moving, generative oneness, a oneness that is never one (or which is always self-differing); hence, the world's crucible is "sluiced" by the motion of speed. Later, while contemplating a world electrified by generating
plants and transformed by speed, the speaker describes how "[s]tars prick the eyes with sharp ammoniac proverbs" (55). The eyes are pricked because they see the stars' light only as the glittering points of needles in the night sky, while the stars' light is proverbial in two senses: first, their light offers a kind of "common" knowledge that speed constitutes the universe and that the "nasal whine of power [that] whips a new universe" into being in the generating plants is the same mutable power as the speeds generated by the internal combustion of the stars (55); second, they give their light, in a literal Latin sense, pro-verbally, before words (or, taking "verb" in its English sense, before actions). The light of the stars is also the speed of light—speed's absolute limit, the velocity at which every relation between things is accessible and given as if instantaneously (but not quite so) before the relative speed of human consciousness can discover those relations in its own right. Here we sense another meaning of Virilio's suggestion that speed is a causal idea: if speed is relation, then the speed of light is the nearest possible expression of absolute relation. Lastly, the speaker reminds the pilot-hero of this prophecy yet to be fulfilled: "Thou hast there in thy wrist a Sanskrit charge / To conjugate infinity's dim marge— / Anew . . .!" (56-57). "Cape Hatteras" aims to imagine new forms of living in the technological world, yet this production must take place in the blurry zone (the "dim marge") between infinity (potentia; the virtual) and its actualized forms or conjugations; like one pursuing a prophecy yet to be fulfilled, the poem proceeds with much conviction, but little certainty. It is in this sense that Crane extends his concern with prophecy to Whitman, who he invokes as a kind of prophet and fore-bearer of his own project: "[I]t was thou who on the boldest heel / Stood up and flung the span on even wing / Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing" (59).

In order to understand how and why Crane sees speed as prophetic, though, we must explore a little more deeply the sense in which it is also a causal force. "Cape Hatteras," a poem
enamoured of celerity and mechanical noise, opens with an image that evokes slowness, quietude, and antiquity: "Imponderable the dinosaur / sinks slow [...] While rises in the west the coastwise range, / slowly the hushed land—" (54). Variants of the word "slow" are repeated conspicuously, first in the image of the dinosaur sinking through the earth, perhaps buried in sand, and second in the gradual coming-into-vision of a coastal mountain range. However, if we consider the way we receive this initial scene of slowness, it appears already to conceal the perspective of a technology of speed—it is patently cinematic. One can imagine the camera lens slowly panning down as it follows the sinking of the "mammoth saurian," before panning up again to capture the other extreme of the vertical axis, following the mountains rising into the sky in order to suggest, paradoxically, that these two slow movements capture the sudden passage of immeasurable eons of time. The "camera-eye" of the poem moves slowly but moves at a rapid clip through geological time. The en-dashes in the following lines suggest rapid jumps forward in time that accompany enormous expenditures of energy: "Combustion at the astral core—the dorsal change / Of energy—convulsive shift of sand" (54). As we pass out of the primordial, geological world of the opening lines, the sands coalesce into the recognizable locale of Cape Hatteras itself, where the Wright Brothers undertook their experiments and where much of the poem will unfold. The single most important detail here is that these tremendous movements, the shaping and determination of the very world, emerge in Crane's poem as a result of "combustion at the astral core," the generation of energy in the heart of the sun (a star or astrum), which not only mirrors the combustion in the earth's core that shifts sands and mountains, but prefigures Crane's equation later on of the human form with an "engine in a cloud." From this astral combustion to the vital combustion of human existence, Crane speaks of the same power: all is animated, manifested, by the same potency, the same immanent and latent
speed that he imbues here with genuine causal force. It is as though we have passed from the pure virtuality of the peculiarly placeless astral core—the phrase is presumably a circumlocution for the sun, but Crane's deliberate vagueness suggests that the star is primordial, that its combustion occurs somehow at the beginning of all things—to the finite and concrete manifestation of that virtuality in the speed-engine of the human being. Crane’s treatment of the sun here resonates with Emerson’s discussion of the sun-dial in “The Editors to the Reader,” which I examine in my second chapter. For Emerson, the sun is an immanent cause, an indwelling causal power; for Crane, the astral core is a repository of the virtual, the immanent formative power of which material things are the determinate, concrete manifestation.

As he proceeds through "Cape Hatteras," Crane sets up the two defining aspects that characterize the blurred modern subject, and which any attempt to forge a livable relation to modernity must traverse: its machinism and its manifestation of the causal power of speed. As Gordon Tapper observes in a chapter on Crane and the sublime, "Cape Hatteras" is replete with images that mingle the sense of possibility and promise in the speed of air travel with that of violent transformation, uncontrollable change, and determination from without (Tapper 158-159). Crane finds that his own attempt to poeticize machinic relations produce no less ambivalent results than Whitman's. In the third stanza, after describing the age as one in which "[w]e know the strident rule / Of wings imperious" and where "Space, instantaneous / Flickers a moment, consumes us in its smile," the speaker announces that, "[s]eeing himself an atom in a shroud— / Man hears himself an engine in a cloud" (55). In the former line, Crane figures humankind as an atom, a depersonalized machinic part of the world around it, but also, in the homophony of "atom" and "Adam," as a being newly formed and rife with potential (Tapper 174). The Adamic reference, of course, is also ambivalent: just as Adam is in one sense holy in
his distinction as the first human being, he is in another sense infernal, being the first to fall to
the temptation of another human being. Adam may attain the "gift" of reason, but he also attains
the knowledge and experience of suffering, much as Crane's Icarian pilot attains the thrills and
heights of extreme speed, but only at a mortal cost. In its images of aircraft, the poem skips back
and forth over the boundaries between machine and animal; his images are relentlessly hybrid,
running from "whirling armatures, / As bright as frogs' eyes, giggling in the girth / Of steely
gizzards" and "moonferrets" to a "Cetus-like" dirigible that recalls the sea monster of Greek
mythology, to "scouting griffons," while the pilot himself is at one point addressed as "Falcon-
Ace," all of which Tapper explores in his analysis of Crane's theriomorphic tropes (56-57;
Tapper 152-56). Insofar as Crane describes the pilot's aircraft as a "sinewy silver biplane," we
sense that the plane is as human as its pilot, that they have blurred together. The "atom in a
shroud" suggests that the atom is hidden and that it is no longer possible to locate the boundaries
between the two forms. Switching from sight to sound, the atom is transfigured into an engine, a
source of combustion, energy, and above all, speed; like the atom that is shrouded, the engine is
occluded behind the hazy boundary of the cloud—insofar as the subject cannot be localized
anywhere, but is nevertheless always changing, moving, producing speed, the blurred subject is,
here again, a haecceity. In the age of rapidity, this subject is always-already a machinic part (an
atom) and a source of speed (an engine). As in Spinoza's monism, all bodies are composites of an
infinitude of other bodies (for any body there are always smaller atomic elements), and bodies

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160 By the time of Crane’s writing, this hybridity of machine and human was already a well-established trope among
the Italian Futurists. In the founding manifesto of Futurism, Marinetti recalls being awe-struck by the sound of cars
roaring outside his window. The experience leads him to declare that in the age of the automobile, “mythology and
the mythical ideal have been superseded. We are about to witness the birth of the Centaur, and soon we shall see the
first Angels fly!” (49). The Icarian pilot of “Cape Hatteras,” angel-winged synthesis of human being and machine,
would fit comfortably alongside Marinetti’s centaur.
are differentiated from one another on the basis of their relative speeds, that is, of what they produce (or are determined to produce) as engines.

The third and final aspect of the blurred subject in "Cape Hatteras" will allow us to see more fully why the causal force of speed matters for Crane's conception of how a livable relation can be created in a thoroughly blurred world. This aspect derives from the fact that whatever part the subject plays in a machinic relation, that part is shrouded, or more properly, non-localizable, that it is a haecceity or event and not an object. But also note how passive Crane's subject is to the knowledge it has of itself: "Man hears himself," sees himself, as an atom or an engine. But more importantly, we are given that equation after being told that "[d]ream cancels dream in this new realm of fact / From which we wake into the dream of act" (55). If the modern subject is a haecceity, it has no given, ultimate ground, no intrinsic way of being. Though the subject wakes into a new and modern "realm of fact," that factuality is equivalent to a dream and is itself canceled as the subject wakes into "the dream of act." I do not think that Crane means to say that modernity poses a world of illusions—far from it—but rather that any reality is itself always dreamlike, always constituted and determined from an indeterminate virtuality, so that there can be no final "realm of fact" that does not depend on the transcendental excess of the dream. This dreaming is not falsehood but abstraction, in as non-pejorative sense as possible: it is the condition of possibility for the world of fact, or what Deleuze would call (and what I have called in respect to Whitman) the virtual. The "dream of act" is what Virilio calls "the causal idea, the idea before the idea," the sense that thought and consciousness speed so far ahead of us that they could never belong to us, but only us to them. For the blurred subject, every self-knowledge turns out to be knowledge of something else and turns out, moreover, to be an indistinguishable composite of mental and physical experience. Facts and acts, as it were, turn out both to be
varieties of the same dream, transfigured by speed and the "alcohol of space" that it creates (59). Interestingly, this notion of a blurry world where thought and action seem to spring up from a wide-open outside closely resembles a concept that Deleuze discovers in modern cinema: the "spiritual automaton." Initially drawing the term from an unfinished work of Spinoza's, the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Deleuze developed this notion further to describe the way that cinema engaged in the machinic production of relations between images. Deleuze saw cinema as reversing the traditional relationship between the subject and its perception, so that the image was no longer something given in perception or taken up by the senses but was instead unfurled by the film on the screen (Besmaïa 145-146, 155). One way of relating this notion to Crane is to say that there is no longer a subject who perceives, but only an "automatic" and delocalized perception that subjectivizes. As in Virilio's understanding of the causal idea, the speed of consciousness precedes its own ideas; speed is the spur of thoughts gone automatic, of thinking that arrives before subjectivity can depart. Like the automatic, unmoored subject of the cinema who is unrolled at the speed of the film projector, the blurred subject is formed and deformed by a variable velocity that sweeps it on into the world. For Crane there is a promise in this idea of an infinite creativity at the "dim marge" of speed, where we receive what we are before we realize what it is, but there is also the challenge that we cannot know what is possible, what can be made truly creative and livable, out of this dangerously uncontrollable potency. Thus, we arrive again at a variant of Spinoza's famous credo: we do not yet know what the body (or the mind) can do, for they are less possessions of ours than we are of theirs. Though Crane possesses the Whitmanian celebratory impulse to indulge in a utopian romance of pure *potentia*, he identifies the dangers of unambiguously embracing *potentia* without considering its ambivalence. Yet, his caution is somewhat different from Emerson’s in “Power.” While
Emerson’s cautious attitude stems from an anxiety about erasing the difference in kind between human bodies and machines, Crane appears less troubled by that erasure. What troubles Crane—what will continue to trouble him—is that he cannot discern a regulatory principle for his poetics of blur, such as Hughes would later explore in the context of rhythm; he finds no means of theorizing a proportional, sustainable, livable practice that could acknowledge the blur of modern life while preserving a modicum of autonomy from it, however provisional.

While on one hand "Cape Hatteras" offers an implicitly Spinozan challenge to discover the "[n]ew verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed / Of dynamos" (55), it represents on the other hand a warning of the consequences of pursuing these verities as if they were goods unto themselves. This has been the problem of speed all along: the power to blur verges on the power to erase. Speed is a monism for modernity, but one that has as much potential for destruction and violence as for innovation. For all the bluster of his verse, Crane deserves credit for recognizing the dangers of the kind of dromological "progress" that "Cape Hatteras" depicts. Virilio says of the armoured fighting vehicle at the end of the First World War that it is "already no longer an auto-mobile, but also a projectile and launcher [...] it hurls both projectiles and itself" (Speed and Politics 78). If it is true that the projectile speed of the tank and the armoured car gave them the power of consuming the space of the battle-front by compressing time, it is truer still of the airplane. Perhaps Virilio would find Crane prescient in "Cape Hatteras," where the first airplanes become "whirling armatures" (stanza five) "blading the wind's flank" (stanza six) as their "[t]aut motors surge, space-gnawing, into flight" (stanza eight); we could mistake Crane’s observation that each "plane [is] a hurtling javelin of winged ordnance" for one of Virilio's more colourful phrases. The entire middle movement of "Cape Hatteras" (which itself holds the conspicuously important status as The Bridge's central and by far longest poem) depicts the ruin of the pilot-
hero who Crane imagines shot down in a dogfight over the waters of Cape Hatteras (Tapper 160). His speaker issues a grave warning to the pilot: "Thine eyes bicarbonated white by speed, O Skygak, see / How from thy path above the levin's lance / Thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance / To reckon" (57). Crane is not concerned merely that speed technology can be used for destructive ends, but that the dangers latent in the acceleration of modern life may become dangerous long before it is possible to counteract them. If we imagine that speed is first and foremost a cause and not an effect, then Crane's lines are legible as a warning against the delusion that speed can be made truly instrumental, that a safe or adequately critical distance could be maintained toward speeds that transport the subject well beyond the generative stage of blur, and toward obliteration. Thus, while the skygak's speed propels him above the dangers of the lightning (here figured in weaponized terms as the "levin's lance"), that same speed blinds him to the danger of the projectile that he is. It is a characteristic moment in Crane's poetry, where imminent death provides a kind of sight (the thrilling experience of speed, of its terrific augmentation of human capacities) at the cost of blindness; here, though, the blinding is doubled, first by the rush of speed, and second by the pilot's death as the aircraft falls and breaks up "into mashed and shapeless debris" (58). In this ninth stanza, Crane gives us the pilot’s death, which interrupts the previous stanza's "Sanskrit charge" to conjugate infinity: "[H]ere at this height receive / The benediction of the shell's deep, sure reprieve” (57). In this stanza, Crane's long, superficially Whitmanesque lines give way to short, choppy lines the break in the middle of a phrase, and often between the syllables of gerunds and progressive verb forms ("now / quarry-hid, twist- / ing," "Enormous repercussive list- / ings down," "In guerilla sleights, trapped in
For Crane, the result of the unadulterated pursuit of speed is troubling: the collision of projectile into projectile, of shells and bullets into planes, of planes into the ocean, and of solid objects into the universal solvent of absolute speed. If Marinetti could giddily suggest in 1909 that war—the truest expression of speed as projectile violence—is “the only hygiene of the world” (51), Crane was not so irresponsible as to make any such affirmation in 1930, however viscerally he felt the appeal of the speed experience and however quintessentially modern a delirium he thought it to be. If Crane could not help but romanticize the Icarian pilot, he also could not help but express something of that pilot’s foolishness, subverting him in his final moments of life, so that the pilot whose ambitions were to master velocity is instead mastered by it. The aircraft and the pilot switch roles—in his fatal nosedive, it is the pilot himself who is piloted.

At this most disjointed moment of the poem, images of movement proliferate: there are images of lifting, tilting, twisting, sinking, listing, spiralling, upturning, unlooping, gyring, dancing, whizzing, dashing, crashing, and, finally, of the bunching of the ruined plane on the beaches of Cape Hatteras (stanza nine, 57-58). Where the early sections of the poem depicted the experience of sustained acceleration and explored the fantastic composites made possible by the power of speed, the jarring images of uncontrollable, contorted movement in the ninth stanza suggest that modernity has lost the measure—the rhythm—of its own motion. The falling airplane tumbles through the air in a grim, speed-frenzied parody of dancing. There is no equivalent here of Whitman's elaborate rhetorical strategy in "To A Locomotive in Winter" that could harness these deadly speeds—but the poem does not end on the crash. It moves instead

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161 Though he employs long, Whitman-like lines and rhetorical flourishes, Crane's liberal use of alliteration and assonance suggests Gerard Manley Hopkins more than Whitman. On the significance of Crane’s discovery of Hopkins’s poetry as he was finishing The Bridge, see Reed’s Hart Crane: After His Lights.
into an extended paean to Whitman's earlier efforts: "But who has held the heights more sure than thou, / O Walt," who "upward from the dead [...] bringest tally, and a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood" (58). Whitman's resurgent presence in the poem comes as a means of recovering the death of the pilot and the stinging failure of the power pursued through acceleration. Crane warns in "Modern Poetry" that "unless poetry can absorb the machine [...] poetry has failed of its full contemporary function" (171); in the conclusion of the same article, he declares that it was Whitman who, "better than any other, was able to coördinate those forces in America which [seemed] most intractable" (173). Whitman represents for Crane the ideal of an affirmative and livable relationship to speed, a rhythm of living. But Crane seems almost at a loss in "Cape Hatteras" as to what remains to be done; to my mind, he faces the interesting conundrum of having posed a problem more convincingly than he can offer its solution. By invoking Whitman as the patron saint of his poem and project, Crane takes him as an inspiration, but also suggests that his own poem can extend the Whitmanian project to make it speak to an accelerated age—why else invoke him at all? Yet Crane struggles after the collision scene to do more than summarize what Whitman has attempted: the longstanding project of demonstrating the underlying unicity-through-difference—the monism—of the manifold peoples of America, the writing of a poetry that speaks with equal eloquence about "Sequoia alleys" and "thunder's eloquence through green arcades" as to the age of machines, including the "fraternal massacre" of the Civil War (58-59). And yet, it is perhaps the greatest weakness of Crane's poem, so swaggeringly ambitious until now, that it ends on so modest a note, with Crane offering a prayer for "Easters of speeding light" to bring about a modern version of the vitalistic, death-transcending ideal of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." This appeal is also conspicuous inasmuch as it refers to a Whitman poem in which the speaker is walking—a far cry from the
mechanical speed of “To A Locomotive in Winter.” Crane’s allusion implies a turn away from the determinism and speed-compromised agency of universal machinism toward a more familiar model of subjects and objects. Crane ultimately cannot resolve the problems of causation and determinism that speed and machinism pose to him. Finding no way through these impasses, Crane instead defers to hope, prophesying that Whitman's legacy will one day be recovered: "Recorders ages hence, yes, they shall hear / In their own veins uncancelled thy sure tread" (60).

Conceding that the redeeming rhythm is yet unfound, his own work yet unfinished, Crane's unresolved concluding lines echo ominously the urging language of the pilot before the crash, while the speaker reaches out and backward, to Whitman, for the resolve to continue and begin again:

Afoot again, and onward without halt,—

Not soon, nor suddenly,—no, never to let go

My hand

in yours,

Walt Whitman—

so— (60)\(^{162}\)

\(^{162}\) While I have not explored it in my reading of "Cape Hatteras," there is a pronounced sexual element in Crane's poem that makes possible a number of alternative readings of the pilot's crash and of Crane's relationship to Whitman. Thomas E. Yingling offers the most notable reading in his landmark *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, where he reminds us that "Cape Hatteras" is, among other things, a love poem, and that Crane's idealization of Whitman had much to do with the latter's frank celebration of male love and sexuality. In this reading, the "plane that crashes is a not so subtle phallic image of the pitch and tragedy of Crane's life as a homosexual, anxiety over which we may read in a number of his late, rather unpolished texts" (215).
Clarke's pursuit of a Whitmanian solution to the problem of speed could not ultimately be resolved. In the face of speeds that threaten their objects with a destructive instantaneity toward one another, a projectile excess, a death by suddenness, his quest for a livable and liberating, we might say rhythmic, relation to speed's determinism does not result in any such stance. Although Crane's intuition to explore the implications of speed was correct, in the end he discovered no more convincing a notion of freedom than his predecessor: given a speed-world that tends threateningly to project discrete instants of experience ever nearer to instantaneity itself, it becomes impossible to untangle any given set of effects from their causes. While Whitman still had access to a form of rhythmic expression that could regulate this speed and allowed causes and effects to blur, but not to merge, in which there was still a distance of approach between cause and effect, Crane found himself confronted with the double recognition that he lacked and needed such a rhythm as Whitman had found, but that the rhythms of the locomotive age were no longer usable. The speed of the train was incomparable to that of the airplane and especially the cinema, where objects seemed to individuate from the luminous intensity of the screen itself. In spite of this fact, we need not think of Crane's poem as a failure per se, especially given the longstanding and continued intractability of more direct and philosophical debates about what freedom could look like under deterministic conditions. While "Cape Hatteras" may have fallen short of its own ambitions, it nevertheless allowed Crane to identify the problem of speed and to articulate the challenge it posed to the enduring relevance of the Whitmanian tradition that seemed to many modernist rather quaint. More importantly, in attempting to rehabilitate Whitman's reputation, Crane extended and deepened the scope of the elder poet's pantheism.

163 Indeed, many of the most provocative and controversial thinkers who informed the modernist period (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche come to mind) posited one form of determinism or another or produced bodies of work that continue to grapple with questions about what freedom might look like under deterministic conditions.
More than any of his contemporaries, Crane perceived that Whitman's monistic, pantheistic world-view was not only already machinic, but that its monism could be framed directly in terms of speed. By radicalizing and reimagining his predecessor's approach and by applying it to the speed experience, Crane played an important role in advancing monism as a lens for conceiving of modernity, the perspective that I have tried to capture with the term "mo(der)nism."

**IV. Dromocratic Rhythms in *Montage of a Dream Deferred***

For all the complexities of Crane's work, the mo(der)nist approach to speed was explored with rather more complexity by Langston Hughes in his poem cycle *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which casts an eye on the fate of the African-American community of Harlem long after the glow of the New Negro Renaissance had worn away, but in the midst of the avant-garde musical renaissance of bebop. While Crane was correct to emphasize the degree to which speed was both a challenge and an opportunity for poetry to imagine a livable, more fully synthesized relation to speed, he was nevertheless hampered by a certain naïveté about the social and political structures that conditioned not only one's access to high speeds, but one's vulnerability to being oppressed by them. In short, it did not occur to Crane to ask a vital question: Whose speed? One of the characteristics of Hughes's poem cycle that one misses in Crane's is a sensitivity to the heterogeneity of the experience of speed across various racial, social, and economic groups, and a sense that some speed technologies were of more dubious social and political use than others.\(^\text{164}\) Crane in 1930 entertains the notion that a liberating synthesis can be

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\(^{164}\) Although there are lower class, non-white, and non-male perspectives in *The Bridge*, they are notably absent from "Cape Hatteras." While Crane devotes an entire movement to the fate of Native Americans after the European contact, it seldom avoids the pitfalls that one might expect of a white male writer born at the turn of the 19th century, from the perpetuation of the "noble savage" stereotype to the use of the problematic "woman-as-land" metaphor. The latter places Crane in a rhetorical tradition most memorably critiqued by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. For all Crane's pretensions of writing a poem that could synthesize the breadth of American experience, the fact that African American voices are
produced between human and machine, and while his pilot-hero ultimately proves self-destructive, it is not clear that Crane entirely rejects this notion.\textsuperscript{165} All of Crane's favourite symbols, either of the immanence of relation or of speed, are monuments (Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty) or machines for mechanical means of transportation (airplanes, locomotives, and subway trains). The great novelty of \textit{Montage} in this regard is that it explores and valorizes a kind of speed technology that is spectacular but not monumental, a movement that actively solicits the engagement of its participants rather than making them into passengers or, indeed, passive recipients. The technologies in question are the jazz band and the cinema projector, which are not only speed machines, but, more importantly, rhythm machines: they speed time to keep time.\textsuperscript{166}

Although I have argued that Crane also incorporates cinematic elements into his poetry, Hughes deploys these resources in a slightly different way. Rather than using cinematic techniques to depict a world where speed blurs seemingly discrete objects together, Hughes places them in analogy with the techniques of the bebop ensemble, making cinematic montage instead a figure for the rhythm that, experienced collectively, in the midst of a community of

\footnotesize{largely absent from \textit{The Bridge} is also curious, especially as Crane had originally intended to include a poem, tentatively titled "The Calgary Express," which would take on the perspective of a "negro porter." Brian Reed devotes a fascinating section of his \textit{Hart Crane: After His Lights} to exploring the implications of Crane's decision to scrap the section (227-230).\textsuperscript{165} Crane's ambivalence toward the aviator-hero is reminiscent of Williams's mixed feelings toward the artist-historian figures who recur throughout \textit{In the American Grain}, which I discuss in the previous chapter. Both kinds of figures suggest, in themselves, a kind of transcendent relationship to their \textit{milieu} (the aviator-hero to space, the artist-historian to time), but one that is relentlessly complicated by immanence (the virtuality of blur, the text's immanent critique of its own transcendent pretensions).\textsuperscript{166} The jazz band with its rhythm section and the projector by showing a certain number of frames-per-second. In \textit{Speed and Politics}, Virilio writes of land warfare that the "maneuver that once consisted in giving up ground to gain Time loses its meaning: at present, gaining Time is exclusively a matter of vectors. Territory has lost its significance in favor of the projectile" (149). I am suggesting that Hughes's poem-bebop-cinema ensemble aims to respond to this new reality by imposing rhythm—and thus intelligibility—upon it. Thus, Hughes's poetry "keeps" time, but without proposing a naïve or utopian reversal of what Virilio calls "dromological progress."}
viewers, can conjugate blur into a livable, if unstable, relation. Hughes announces this musical aspect in the prefatory note to *Montage*:

[T]his poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a

*community in transition*. (387, my italics)

So, bebop becomes a means of punctuating and producing rhythms that constitute a community in the midst of transition (a community that is changing, moving, and thus borne on by a particular speed). This is to say that insofar as the community is itself a multiplicity of rhythms, bebop re-communes the community, reorients and recomposes its speeds. In an important article on the politics of bebop, Eric Lott describes this new strain of jazz as distinct from, and often antagonistic to, earlier jazz forms in its development of "an aesthetic of speed and displacement—ostentatious virtuosity dedicated to reorienting perception even as it rocked the house. Every instrument became immediately more mobile, everything moved" (600-601, emphasis in the original). Hughes's poem, like bebop and like cinema, aims to reorient perception by fashioning musical speed, as well as the audience's attention. *Montage* attempts to compose what I will call an "improvisational community." This community, improvised into being and provisional in nature, would not be founded on specific principles or on the shared identity of its members, but enacted in transitory practices of cultural-artistic production in which audiences participate in the fleeting speed-structure produced by the poem. The improvisational stance of Hughes's work depends in large measure on the common nature of poetry, jazz, and cinema as spectacles, undertakings that require, shape, and direct the attention of an audience or
public. This orientation toward social life is often more muted in Crane. Bebop in particular offered Hughes the means for making an intervention into the politics of speed. Hughes recognizes in 1948 what Lott argues more than three decades later: "Bebop was about making disciplined imagination alive and answerable to the social change of its time" (597). The rhythms that bebop fashions out of its unprecedented musical speeds are notably jagged, disjunctive, "broken," and distorted (qualities that are also important in the titular cinematic technique of montage). By making use of bebop, Hughes's poems strive to express a multiplicity of rhythms that are coherent, but which resist settling down into any one complacent relation or order. He resists the blur of the approach toward absolute speed while recognizing its usefulness as a source of transformation and as a means of ensuring that rhythm is always "deferred," that its measures never become homogeneous, indifferently repetitious, or predictable, even while it challenges a more pernicious deferral of the dream of equality, a deferral that in Hughes's poetry often takes physical form as the deferral or limitation of mobility. Montage hovers at the boundary between delineated objects and the blurred world, where "sharp and impudent interjections" are conjugations or actualizations of blur, or forms that are suddenly, momentarily crystallized by being brought down from blurring speed into a rhythm

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167 John Lowney has written compellingly of the links between bebop and black militancy at the time of Hughes's writing. In Montage, Lowney argues, bebop becomes a marker of the "black cultural pride and militant anger" that was prevalent in mid-century Harlem (358). While Hughes himself is not a militant in any straight-forward sense, he is certainly aware of the antagonism between the "aggressively modernist" aesthetic of bebop (Lowney 365) and the mellow, commercially friendly jazz that had become popular among white audiences (Lott 599). Bebop drummer and innovator Max Roach dispels any uncertainty about this antagonism in a 1962 article, simply entitled "Jazz," where he declares that "[u]ntil the white musician has been called upon to give and experience as much, and the same [suffering and perseverance as black musicians], he can not, in all honesty, claim the kind of affinity to the music he insists he has" (115).

168 David R. Jarraway makes a similar, and I believe complementary, case for what he calls Hughes's model of "dissident subjectivity," which resists "the vision of bourgeois transcendence in Europe [and] the melting-pot indifferentism in the American dream" insofar as it offers a subject who is ever unfinished and non-totalizable (97).
that dances back and forth between stability and instability, as in the improvisations of a bebop ensemble in a jam session.\textsuperscript{169}

While Crane and Hughes both conceive of speed (or rhythm) as metamorphic, Crane sees this metamorphic power applying most profoundly in the relationship between the individual and a \textit{milieu} of objects. Hughes is more interested in devising rhythms, and the rhythmic formation that speed engenders is first and foremost a community, a social body; it is of decisive importance for Hughes that this social body is ultimately only a rhythm of life. Crane's somewhat pallid answer to the need for a livable relation to speed was to stake a claim for the continued relevance of Whitman's legacy; however, insofar as Hughes actually expands on the possibilities of Whitman's experiments in rhythm (such as in "To A Locomotive in Winter"), we might wonder if Hughes is better able to supply that answer. But Hughes also possesses an acute sense of the dangers and complications posed by speed. "Parade," the second poem of the collection, features white policemen enforcing uneasy order on a black crowd from motorcycles that signify the police officers' status as arbiters of access to variable speeds. Insofar as \textit{Montage} also seeks a relation to speed that is not Icarian, as in Crane, or dromocratic and authoritarian, as in the police whose role is to remind the crowd in "Parade" of the implicit speed limits that their unrest cannot cross, Hughes's late poetry also develops Emerson's earlier concerns about the threat of the erasure of the distinction between the machine and the human. Though he tacitly accepts the machinic nature of the human community, or rather its nature as something that can

\textsuperscript{169} Bartholomew Brinkman has described \textit{Montage} in a recent article as the "enactment of a continuous and unresolved jazz/film dialectic [that] presents a succession of punctuated lyrical moments that are augmented and challenged by the talk-back and crossover of bop" and as "a formal working-through of the larger social dialectic of film and jazz" (94). Though my own framework is not fundamentally dialectical, I think that Brinkman is correct to underscore the importance of irresolution and the continuous nature of conflict in Hughes's poem cycle; if the community is only the rhythm imposed on a vital speed (that is, if it is only a speed of relation), then that speed would be irresolvable by nature, since to resolve it would be to cease the cultural work of transforming speed into rhythm.
be produced and transformed by speed-machines, Hughes also seeks a way to prevent his community from being made a passive, unresisting part of a social machine operating under conditions of white hegemony. In the senses that I have outlined here, *Montage* is the resistance-machine that Hughes builds from the heterogeneous parts of Whitman's and Emerson's universal machinism and their respective attitudes toward the phenomenon of speed.

In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker, Jr. cautions his readers against the habit of conflating the white modernist projects of James Joyce, Eliot, and others with those of their African American counterparts. Most importantly, Baker observes that "the very histories that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism" (xvi). This observation that white and African American modernisms are informed by radically different historical experiences suggests more than an uncontroversial imperative to historicize when dealing with black modernists like Hughes; rather, it suggests that we must recognize the ways that black modernism often addressed itself to fundamentally different problems than those of white modernism. Thus, even when Hughes addresses himself, as Crane did, to the problem of how to relate to the speeds and slownesses of a changing world, we must be wary that this problem involves radically different dimensions for Hughes than it did for Crane. One way to illustrate this difference is to ask in what sense the Harlem of the late '40s and early '50s was, as Hughes calls it, a "community in transition." I have already suggested that Hughes means in part that the community is rhythmically composed from the heterogeneous speeds (or relations) that it is. But in a more obvious sense, the Harlem of 1948 was quite different than it had been during the New Negro Renaissance years, when Alain Locke proclaimed it a "race capital" in which "Negro life [was] seizing upon its first chances for group
expression and self-determination" ("The New Negro” 7). In 1948, Harlem was for Hughes a place whose earlier hope and optimism could be seen only darkly through the lens of the Great Depression and the ensuing mass unemployment (exacerbated by the corresponding decline of white patronage that had fueled Harlem's earlier prosperity), unabated discrimination, and the costly race riots of 1935 and 1943 (Lenz 272). The dream of economic prosperity and social equality with whites that drew so many rural southern African Americans to the north during the Great Migration had been tempered by a new skepticism in the post-war years (Lowney 358).

Those black Harlemites who had enlisted to fight in the Second World War with the hope of proving themselves equal to their white counterparts found especially bitter disappointment in the riots of 1943, in which a black soldier was injured, and rumoured to have been killed, by a white police officer (Lott 598). In this atmosphere, Hughes's specific appeal to bebop is significant. Lott comments perceptively that bebop, with its obscure jargon, distinctive fashions, and frequent irreverence toward the older generation of jazz aristocracy (and especially to the expectations of white music writers), was a music with a genuine "political edge" that we all too often forget (598-599). "Bebop," claims Lott, "was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of its moment. Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy combatted in the streets" (599, my emphasis). Like the bebop musicians he channels, Hughes seeks a style and a "rhythm" suitable to expressing his dissatisfaction with the status quo while at the same time challenging it through formal innovation. In a broader sense, Hughes indicts the white hegemony for its constant deferral of the most basic aspirations of black Americans, but in doing so hopes also to preserve the idea of Harlem as a place that nevertheless refuses to abandon the basic
ambitiousness of dreaming: that whatever movement toward freedom is repressed in day-to-day life is not erased outright, but waits and stirs, biding time until it can return.

Hughes's poems speak directly and perceptively to the effects of the dromocratic control of speed and mobility on Harlem. Between the Great Depression and the 1950s, Harlem had become just such a place, in part because of the unequal distribution of such speed technologies as the personal automobile. In their famous 1944 essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observe the creep of urban decay: “Even now the older houses just outside the concrete city centers look like slums, and the new bungalows on the outskirts are at one with the flimsy structures of world fairs in their praise of technical progress” (120). Michael Harrington, the future founder of the Democratic Socialists of America, notes in a 1962 discussion on the findings of the President's Civil Rights Commission that this process had accelerated and that "suburban zoning laws keep out low-income housing and force the poor to remain in the decaying, central area of the cities. The very development of the metropolitan areas thus has the tendency to lock the door on the poor" (146). This gradual hollowing out of the environs surrounding the city centres at the expense of those who remained there was exacerbated by the massive proliferation of automobiles in the first half of the twentieth century. Access to automobiles "accelerated the exodus of middle class Americans from cities to suburbs, thereby creating affluent suburbs and isolated ghettos in the central cities" (Leggon 42). Since there was significant economic disparity between white and black Americans, white city-dwellers tended to have more reliable and consistent personal access to automobiles and, by extension, to speed—it is not for nothing that the urban exoduses of this
This phenomenon had an especially pronounced effect on Harlem, which suffered from crowding and overpopulation after having absorbed thousands of African American migrants from the south during the Great Migration years. These migrants came in search of better personal treatment and more stable employment, but as Robert L. Boyd argues in a recent paper, they were necessarily likely to receive either. Though the first wave of immigration fostered the growth of important economic and artistic elites (such as the New Negro Renaissance writers), it also contributed to the over-saturation of labour markets in large northern black neighborhoods like Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville (Boyd 104). By the 1940s, local economic strain continued to restrict the upward social mobility of many southern migrants and their descendants in Harlem (Boyd 106).

Having watched the evolution and gradual decay of Harlem for many years, Hughes could not have failed to notice the real effects of unequal access to speed, though he did so less from "street level" than from the relatively privileged vantage-point of bourgeois life. Indeed, Arnold Rampersad describes how Hughes was acutely aware during this period of a growing tension between the black lower classes that had always been his inspiration and the black middle class to which he now belonged; however, it was Hughes's "emotional dependency on the black masses as well as his painful detachment from them" that drove him to write Montage in the first place (151). From his bourgeois vantage point, as someone who was capable of travel and had access to speeds that much of Harlem did not, Hughes was well aware that this inequality of access often amounted to a kind of discrimination by speed, a filtering-out of the

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170 Though the term is evocative, it is also somewhat misleading. As Andrew Wiese has shown, there was a significant black middle class in pre-1950 America that also participated in the "flight" to the suburbs (1496). Nevertheless, those who lacked the means to participate in suburbanization (or, as importantly, those who had no desire to participate) were disproportionately non-white, in large part because the economic means of dwelling outside the city centre and of commuting to urban workplaces tended to be more readily available to white Americans.
certain racial and economic groups from zones where wealth, power, and speed were all concentrated—in short, he could notice dromocracy at work. ¹⁷¹ Hughes had recognized as early as the 1920s that the dromocratic restrictions on who could move where and under what circumstances were essentially discriminatory. In his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea*, Hughes describes the simmering racial tension inflamed by white freedom of movement in Harlem at the height of the New Negro Renaissance. While whites flocked to Harlem to patronize black clubs and cabarets, many Harlemites bristled and took an attitude paraphrased by Hughes: "We can't go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won't even let us in your clubs" (225).

If Hughes is conspicuously silent on the possibilities of the machine for modern consciousness, it is because he knows, more than Crane ever had occasion to, that technical machines are always already compromised for certain groups, and none more so than his own; nevertheless, if we recall Dinerstein's argument that jazz had always been a machine music, an attempt to invent rhythms that would allow us to live alongside the clatter of a machine-driven modernity, we can see a Hughes who does not deny the power of the machine, but who is rather more skeptical of the possibilities of this power for sustaining social life than Crane had been. Thus, in *Montage* Hughes approaches the problem of the unequal access to mobility as a problem of a community that is dominated from without, condemned to living in the bounds of particular speeds, of a regular, determinate, and controllable rhythm. The remainder of my chapter will explore how Hughes's poetry intervenes in this problem and strives to find a way of resisting the hegemonic

¹⁷¹ Hughes also noticed the nuances of the ways that class and racial conflicts tended to intersect in Harlem, and that there was often a simmering and mutual resentment between lower-class Harlemites and their middle-class counterparts. In the poems "Low to High" and "High to Low," Hughes plays out a dialogue between these two positions. In the former, a lower-class speaker expresses resentment at being forgotten by a black middle class that profits from lower-class labour and conveniently forgets that it is black; in the latter, the middle-class speaker expresses a kind of respectability politics of "trying to uphold the race" against those who "talk too loud" and "look too black" (411-412). The speaker also underscores a split between the established black middle class and those whose Harlem roots begin with the Great Migration, who "shout out loud in church" and act "as if [they] were down South" (412).
social and political structures that prevented African American communities like late-1940s Harlem from actualizing the latent, potential power of speed into real powers of acting.

The state of Harlem in the late 1940s also goes some way toward explaining why Hughes does not, and perhaps cannot, appeal to concrete technical machines, as Crane does, however inconclusively, as a source of potentially liberating speeds. The reason for this difference has everything to do with dromocracy: the form of domination that works by controlling and curtailing who has access to speed, and under what circumstances that access can be given.  

Virilio claims that the city is primarily "a human dwelling place penetrated by channels of rapid communication (river, road, coastline, railway)"; the city is not a destination, but a crossroads, a network of transit routes designed to exchange and to regulate speed: a "habitable dwelling"  

(Speed and Politics 31). To that end, the economic significance of urban zones depends on perpetuating and accelerating the profitable circulation of traffic (commerce). In other words, a primary function of cities is to smooth out resistance to the circulation of the bourgeoisie (who come to occupy fixed domiciles on the outskirts, in suburbs) to and from city centres (33). Corollary to these zones of easy circulation are low-speed zones that Virilio argues have historically served to slow "the penetrating power of the migrating hordes," that is, the dispossessed and poor, those for whom fixed dwelling is always precarious and who lack the economic means to escape low-speed zones once they have been trapped there (33). The effects of the dromocratic treatment of slums as speed traps for the impoverished appear time and time again in Hughes's poem cycle, such as in "Children's Rhymes," where a speaker marvels at the

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172 Duffy suggests that these inwardly turned processes of dromocratic control play into a broader process that Virilio calls "endocolonization": after imperialism reaches every corner of the globe, imperial powers turn the technologies of speed, once deployed to dominate and control colonized peoples, against their own citizens (44). Though endocolonization will not be a focus of my reading of Hughes, it is worth keeping this global context in mind.
cramped conditions of Harlem: "There is two thousand children / in this block, I do believe!" (390). Not only are these children crowded into Harlem, but they are essentially stuck there, as if their crowding together forecloses the social mobility that would grant them a degree of physical mobility. In the poem's refrain, another speaker lays bare the underlying inequality: "What don't bug / Them white kids / sure bugs me: / "We knows everybody / Ain't free!" (390). In the later poem "Deferred," the speaker wonders if he will graduate high school this year, at the age of twenty, after giving a litany of lost years, failed grade levels, and drop-outs. What the speaker hopes to gain from this education is in a sense the right to participate in the economic circulation of the typical white bourgeois. Some of the things he desires are a "white enamel stove," two suits (bought simultaneously), a television set, paid furniture bills, and a cooperative wife (413-414). He consoles himself, knowing how far removed he is from such a future, with the notion that "Heaven, heaven is my home," though what he really wants is the bourgeois dream: not a home in heaven, but a heaven of the home (414). But another element of the poem can help to shed some light on Virilio's notion of dromology. One of its important details is that the speaker "got put back [in school] when [he] come [sic] north" (413), and so the speaker's education is interrupted in part because he is compelled to move. There is an irony here insofar as the speaker's initial mobility (or his ability to move to Harlem in the first place) contributes to the deferral of his education, and thus to the restriction of his future mobility, whether social or otherwise. But this framework challenges the way that I have framed speed thus far, as potentia or latent power. In order to add some nuance to that position, I want to propose a definition: the dromocratic subject is one whose movement is not entirely her own. She does not move, but is made to move, and her mobility is the expression of a potentia, but it is not expressed through her; on the contrary, it is a potentia that is captured or bound up by a power of compulsion, a
potestas. According to this scheme, the dromocratic subject may well be mobile (in the sense that Virilio's "migrating hordes" are mobile), but it is compelled to mobility in the service of someone else. The potentia of the dromocratic subject is seized by the dromocrat's potestas, which captures and vampirizes it, so that the dromocrat's potentia is, in effect, what it captures from its subjects. Thus, we return in Hughes to the problem that troubled Emerson and vexed Crane: how can one preserve freedom in the face of a power as ambivalent, immanent, and potentially dangerous as speed? Hughes does not answer the question in this poem, but he does give his version of the problem. The speaker of "Deferred" is a dromocratic subject insofar as his youthful move from the south to the north, like that of so many African Americans who came north to Harlem during the Great Migration, was a necessity borne of economic pressure and state repression in the south. The most obvious marker of the speaker's dromocratic subjection is that his life in Harlem has become a rhythm of deferrals, from the periodic interruptions in his education during his youth to the fact that later on, his son has "quit school to work" (413); we begin to suspect that the son's life will unfold rather like the father's. Further still, in the second stanza, where we see the speaker some years on, he tells us that he is moving again and that "where we're moving / there ain't no stove" (413). The lack of a stove suggests a home furnished only with bare necessities; if this is so, we can surmise that the speaker has once against been afforded a modicum of speed only insofar as it re-entrenches him in a zone of low speed, low circulation.

The montage technique weaves together the various voices: italicized stanzas seem at first to give us the voice of a youth (who wants to graduate high school and learn French), then

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173 My primary inspirations here are Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, plateau thirteen ("7000 B.C.E.: Apparatus of Capture") and Frédéric Lordon's recent study Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza & Marx on Desire (see esp. pages 1-4 and 117-120).
of a young adult (who wishes for another bottle of gin, a cooperative wife, and to pass the civil service), and finally of an older man (who ceases to dream explicitly of anything, but merely comments that he has never owned a radio). At the end of the poem, the gradually aging voice blends into the voice given in Roman type, which does not progress through time, but seems anchored in a single present. While the italics give us the voice of one who grows up and is gradually shaped to seek the bourgeois ideal, the Roman type gives us a speaker who has already lived that life and still finds the ideal unattainable. This speaker dreams about a conspicuously, perhaps tellingly "white" enamel stove, about new suits, paid furniture bills, a television set, a heavenly home, and taking up Bach. And yet, this speaker can make no heaven of his home; that privilege belongs to the bourgeois, whose very privilege of staying put in a single fixed dwelling betrays the privilege of unrestricted economic movement in the city centre. The speaker in the Roman type, on the contrary, is in the midst of moving to a more modest residence. Unlike the bourgeois whose actual sedentary lifestyle masks a profound potential for movement, this speaker occupies the other position in the dromocratic topology: the exploited migrant, thrown from place to place by waves of economic necessity, whose actual movement is the reflection of a potential for speed that is severely limited from without. Thus, neither of the two voices in "Deferred" end up escaping one another, but the poem nevertheless presents the inextricability of their situation, as the italicized voice declares itself as part of a [montage / of a dream / deferred" while the other voice rejoins with the bebop tag first introduced by Hughes in "Dream Boogie": "Buddy, have you heard?"(414). The ending is not a dialectical resolution of the two voices into a single consciousness, but two voices that, having been separate like two parallel circuits for the entire poem, now communicate their dissatisfaction to one another. While "Deferred" demonstrates on the one hand the ways that dromocracy over-determines where and
under what conditions its subjects can move, on the other hand it offers a glimpse of two separate voices or circuits that rhythmically, cinematically compose together into relation around the single focal point of their mutual exclusion from the bourgeois ideal. It is to Hughes's credit that this moment is brief and ambiguous, that it makes no claim to be any more than a mutual recognition, a speaking-out of one voice to another—but that is enough in itself. The poem does not leave us with any inflated hopes for revolutionary action, but it offers its own small resistance: this communication (the "have you heard?") becomes Montage's repeated call-to-attention and is a speed-machine in its own right. It functions as a question and an interjection, a means of asking and of telling, inasmuch as the question almost always implies the same response. The resurgence of this call at the end of “Deferred” also intervenes in the rhythm of the poem. The poem closes without closure, ending as it does on a refrain that calls back and forth to other moments in the cycle. Though the poem’s voices cannot escape their dissatisfaction within the bounds of the poem itself, the concluding refrain is fugitive; it scatters the reader’s attention to other moments in the collection rather than concentrating it on the seemingly intractable dissatisfactions of “Deferred.” This rhythmic intervention disrupts the self-sufficiency of the poem, in a sense slipping the implicitly policed boundaries of the text—we cannot understand the poem except in its communication with other poems in the cycle. The call at the end of “Deferred” direct us back to "Dream Boogie," the cycle’s opening poem, where we are told to listen for the "boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred" (388). The "have you heard" is like the jazz riffs that Hughes references in his preface, recalling the rhythmic rumble that calls upon a brief, improvisional community that, though it may not yet be capable of overturning the whole order responsible for the "dream deferred," nevertheless interrupts its control over speed at the local level. Again, Hughes offers no utopian overturning here, but he does offer a modicum of
resistance against the over-determination by economic circumstances that tend to present themselves as irresistible.

The darker side of this apparently irresistible economic and social pressure appears in poems like "Ballad of the Landlord," where a black tenant complains for five stanzas about the disrepair of his home, to which the landlord is more or less indifferent. Here, we return to the problematic of the economically and socially constrained dromocratic subject whose fate is to be forced into unfree movement at the convenience of the economic flows that sweep it away. In the third and fourth stanzas, the tenant defies the landlord's demands for payment of a ten-dollar rent due until his leaking roof and broken steps are repaired, and in the fifth the speaker's defiance becomes a threat of violence (402). This threat is all the pretext the landlord needs to be done with their conflict. As a white person of some economic means, the landlord need only appeal to the arbiters of movement and speed, the police, to "[c]ome and get this man" (402). The landlord seizes the opportunity to be rid of the tenant and exaggerates this first spark of violence, declaring that the tenant is "trying to ruin the government / And overturn the land" (402). The coincidence of the landlord's lie with the arrival in the poem of the police speaks to one of the troubling aspects of dromocratic authority—that to control the limits of speed is also to control the flow of information.174 As soon as the landlord appeals to the police, control of the narrative speeds away from the tenant. At this point, the poem's structure also changes in telling ways. The first six stanzas are quatrains and their lines are long enough that the tenant can lay out his grievances: the roof and steps are broken; the tenant has informed the landlord of the problems

174 I emphasize the dromocratic element of the landlord's reaction; however, the more obvious aspect also deserves mention: the landlord's suggestion that the tenant is a radical plays into white fears and prejudices about black radicalism, either of the Communist or black nationalist variety. Hughes was all too aware of such prejudices and would face them in his own right not long after publishing Montage, when in March of 1953 he was called to testify before Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Sub-Committee on Investigations on suspicion of Communist sympathies (Rampersad 209).
before; the tenant should not have to pay the landlord his ten dollars until the problems are fixed. After the landlord speaks and invokes the powers of the police, the stanzas become instruments of efficiency, conveying facts with the aggressive speed and force of exclamations: "Coppers whistle! / Patrol bell! / Arrest" (403). The staccato effect conveys the rapid arrival of the police, the practically immediate sweeping-up of the tenant, who is passively caught up in a speed that he did not generate and cannot control. From this point on, the tenant does not speak, but is only spoken of by others. He is carried along in this brief burst of speed, only to be carried off to a new locale and newly restrictive locale: a county jail cell. The final three lines of the poem are newspaper headlines, suggesting that speed with which his fate has been decided and disseminated as information—albeit conspicuously lacking in any of the details that make up the tenant's complaints in the first five stanzas. The final three lines spit back the speed-deformed version of the first five stanzas: "MAN THREATENS LANDLORD / TENANT HELD NO BAIL / JUDGE GIVES NEGR0 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL" (403). This particularly dark poem is a cautionary note in Hughes's volume. For a cycle about a "community in transition," "Ballad of the Landlord" shows an individual conspicuously divorced from that community; more importantly, though, it shows the asymmetry of resistance against dromocracy, that dromocracy works most effectively against individuals who are divorced from their relations to others, that is, from their powers of acting. Here, the individual tenant is powerless—he attempts to resist the landlord, to trouble the economic flow in which the latter is involved by withholding the ten dollars but is swept from the scene and made passively to move according to a temporal rhythm whose radical compression he cannot challenge. The lesson of "Ballad of the Landlord" is that under dromocratic conditions, the individual must compose an alter-rhythm, another way
of making and keeping pace against external limits, in order to exercise any freedom at all. In short, the individual must allow herself to compose another body.

In "Parade," the second poem of Montage, Hughes offers one way of imagining what that body and rhythm would look like. I want to frame this poem as one sort of answer to the Spinozan question to which I periodically return: what is a body capable of doing, or of being, under different relations of speed and slowness? In Hughes, this question might take the following form: what speeds can this community in transition attain? What rhythms is it capable of composing in spite of the various speed limits that are arrayed against it? The poem opens with a summary of the bodies—"Seven ladies / and seventeen gentlemen"—who will make up the composite body of the titular parade (388). Except for Cadillacs full of dignitaries, the parade moves through the street "on foot... on foot... / on foot," under the controlling gaze of motorcycle police (389). From a dromocratic perspective, the crowd is already a microcosm of Harlem's socio-economic organization, with the car-driven dignitaries representing a relatively mobile but comparatively small black bourgeoisie and the crowds on foot standing in for the less mobile majority, all of them parading together, at a uniform speed before the police. Here, the potential for speed is necessarily a marker of the authority and the privilege of mobility, and Hughes frames the conflict in this poem by explicitly pairing mobility and racial identity: the relatively slow black crowd and the relatively fast white police. One of the more important nuances in the poem comes when Hughes tells us that the white motorcycle police "will speed [the parade] / out of sight / if they can" (389, my emphasis). In other words, it is the dromocratic function of the police to ensure the smooth and unimpeded movement of the crowd—to enforce upon them a certain rhythm—and to route them along a certain trajectory. Notably, speed is not here a good

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175 In "Ballad of the Landlord," the police again figure as agents of routing and rerouting.
in itself—the masses are not disempowered for being slow as such, but for having little control over the speeds available to them. The fact that the majority are sped along at a steady, orderly rate by the police is as much an expression of dromocratic control as any enforced experience of slowness. At this point, rhythm must become our central concept. The crowd will be allowed to move at speed, but only to serve the more pressing aim of letting it run its course in the street, to dissipate until the parading body falls apart. In other words, the parade will be allowed to move, but only if it submits to a carefully policed rhythm. Once it can be directed out of the streets and into the tenements and dwellings, the composite parts of the parading body will be expected to fall into their regular daily rhythms where, separated from a collective power of acting, they will be more easily controlled. If we read the poem with this rhythmic undercurrent in mind, the description of the procession's "[m]arching... marching... / Marching... / noon till night" takes on a more ominous tone that goes some way to explaining the policemen's doubt (they will speed the parade away, but only "if they can") (389). Lowney connects the martial regularity of the crowd's marching to the experiences of black Second World War veterans, which contributes to the defiant tone that the parade takes after we are introduced to the white policemen (372). In the next stanza, another voice, in italics, interjects: "I never knew / that many Negroes / were on earth"; the words initially seem to hang in wonderment, until we get the final line: "did you?" (389). The stanza can be read as the speaker's friendly overture to the reader, an effort to involve her in the poem as if she were another onlooker, but it reads at the same time as a taunting challenge to the police, for whom the "[s]olid black [of the crowd] / can't be right" (389). If the poem opens up doubt that the police can control the situation, it is because of the crowd's magnitude, that it might be swept up into a rhythm of its own making—or, worse, that it might sweep the police, the very guardians of dromocratic authority, into that rhythm. This is precisely
what Hughes presages and implies in the final lines of his poem, where we once again see the bebop interjections and cinematic montage technique come into play:

I never knew!

PARADE!

A chance to let

PARADE!

the whole world see

PARADE!

old black me! (389)

We are meant, perhaps, to hear both the din of the crowd and the whine of the policemen's sirens in the intervening repetitions of the word "PARADE." The stanza encapsulates what the "community in transition" is capable of doing and, more importantly, of being: assuming that the interjections gesture, however indirectly, to the police, the stanza draws together three, perhaps four, voices and blurs them into a single rhythmic construction.¹⁷⁶ The first line, in italics, is still the voice of the bystander. The third, fifth, and seventh lines all belong to the initial speaker who

¹⁷⁶ Hughes employs this tactic of troubling the limits between supposedly discrete subjects throughout Montage, perhaps most famously in "Theme for English B," one of Hughes's best-known works. The speaker, a black student at Columbia, as Hughes had been, ruminates on an assignment given to him by a white instructor; the rumination leads the speaker to implicate himself in the teacher's identity and vice versa, declaring that "[b]eing me, [the assignment] will not be white. / But it will be / a part of you, instructor" (410). "Theme for English B" should be read as an extension of Hughes's early poem "I Too," in which the speaker lays a direct claim for African American writers on the Whitmanian tradition in poetry.
narrates the parade preparations, and obviously fit together in a single sequence ("A chance to let the whole world see old black me!").

The third and fourth voices enunciate the same words (the interjection "PARADE!") but would do so in radically different senses. The third, which we can imagine even if the interjections are not also police sirens, is the sound of a cheering crowd—perhaps not a crowd that literally shouts "PARADE!", but one whose noise and presence punctuates every other utterance in the stanza. The crowd would here be akin or identical to what Whitman called "lawless music" in "To A Locomotive In Winter," a sonic difference not yet composed into definitive rhythms, though the subjects that comprise it are policed and determined in any number of ways. No rhythm is thinkable without this fore-going noise that it must dismiss in order to be and to exist as rhythm at all. In this sense, the crowd represents a drawing-out of policed subjects, subjects bound to particular dromocratic rhythms, into a space where these rhythms can relax and loosen. The crowd's noise is immanent difference, a pure and unsignifying static—the raw virtuality of all sound rushing forth to signify everything all at once, and thus signifying nothing at all. It is here that we can posit a fourth voice, belonging to the police siren. This voice enunciates the same words on the page (again, not literally, but poetically), but in a completely different manner. The siren is pure interjection, or rather, pure sonic repetition that selects one element from the plenum of sounds and singles it out in the act of repeating it. This repeated sound becomes audible because it is now stands out from the vast equality of an everything-at-once. If we take the third and fourth voices together, we have the rudiments of rhythm: the repeated sound cutting time, like a signal tone, into the pure difference of an everything-at-once that now falls into the background against the single repeated sound and becomes a potent silence as long as it is related to one of its repeated elements. But this is so far
only an alternation between sound and silence. The dromocratic function of the police, read in this manner, is to subject the crowd to this alternation, to overpower and defuse whatever alternative rhythms spring forth from the crowd, from their noise. But Hughes's poem relates this alternation of the third and fourth voices directly to the first and second voices, to the onlooker (the audience) and the one who narrates (the poet-figure). There is no dialectic, no opposition between any of the voices that is sublated, at once overcome and preserved, because the first and second voices do not present themselves as alternatives or antitheses; on the contrary, they weave themselves directly into the third and fourth voices.177 This non-dialectical composition of the four voices is the conceptual heart of the poem. The interjections that initially read as interruptions of the intervening lines are in reality part of the montage effect that Hughes builds; the effect is less of interruption (of the second voice being rendered inaudible or senseless by the "siren"), but of a kind of simultaneity, of everything being pulled, blurred together, though the boundaries between each voice remain intact—except for the boundary I have posited between the third and fourth voices. This boundary becomes entirely blurred, the one indistinct from the other. As long as the police have been pulled into the rhythmic machine of this final stanza, they become bound up in the clamouring voice of the crowd whose noise they presuppose (the siren sounds only to cut through a sound that it must strive to overpower in the first place). The police who arrive in the poem to represent the authority over movement are implicated here in the poetic composition, even the constitution, of an improvisational rhythm that, while temporary and fragile, nevertheless expresses the continuity and resistance of a community that cannot overthrow its oppression merely by obtaining raw speed. Under these circumstances, the defiant display of that community's blackness, so threatening as it is to the white policemen and to the

177 In reading the basic mechanisms of this poem, and of Montage in general, as non-dialectical, I depart from such dialectical readings of the Montage cycle as Brinkman's.
political class whose proxies they are, is not only a resistant act, but one that implicates its would-be oppressors—the police, in this instance—in the very possibility of finding coherence and rhythm in that act of displaying in the first place.

Ironically, the mo(der)nist conception of the individual and social or political body that we encounter in Crane and Hughes, though it participates in the rhetoric of jarring, transformative novelty, looks backward as much as forward. The “blurred” bodies that they portray as effects of an accelerating technological modernity are indebted, as I have argued, to the influence of writers like Whitman and, by extension, Emerson, who drew on the philosophical and aesthetic resources available to them to imagine the effects of an increasingly speedy, mechanical world on human bodies. Such a backward glance from Crane and Hughes to Emerson and Whitman would be partial and obscured, though, if it stopped here. Beyond the Transcendentalists we must discern Spinoza’s universal machinism and his dromological reduction of the body to a relation of speed and slowness. We might regard Spinoza’s influence itself as a kind of blur, a transformation of certain components and elements of thought into chimerical forms. Yet, for all the strangeness of this strain of thought, it provides modernists like Crane and Hughes with new conceptual resources and, indeed, new problems. These are aesthetic deployments of Spinozan philosophy, but they nevertheless address the same implicit questions: how would one live in a world where all entities are relations of speed? What becomes possible and impossible? For Crane, this dromological perspective demands a new conception of individual freedom; his uncomfortable conclusion is that if speed is the very source of our freedom and power, it can also subjugate and overpower us—speed can become uncontrollable. In Hughes, this problematic link between speed and control becomes the basis for a rhythmic politics and a dromocratic vision of urban life in the United States after the Second World War.
that draws equal inspiration from cinema and bebop jazz. If the body is a configuration of motion and rest, controlling speed becomes the key to controlling bodies—all that remains as resistance is a kind of social alter-rhythm, a collective refusal to be policed. As much as these are aesthetic deployments of elements of Spinozan philosophy, we must also regard them as creative distortions. Spinoza would not recognize himself in Hughes’s methods or Crane’s; neither, perhaps, would Emerson or Whitman. And yet, it is precisely the Spinozan strain underlying these disparate figures and their respective literary projects that lends them consistency as integral elements of machinic mo(der)nism.
EPILOGUE

If on the one hand Spinoza is a point of convergence for different modes of thinking about immanence and its consequences in American modernism, it is equally true, on the other, that he marks their divergence. Spinoza’s influence strains in many directions and resists being abstracted into anything quite so cohesive as a tradition. And yet, it was with a mind to identifying a particular tradition in American modernist poetry, one founded upon the idea of immanence and the radical continuity of seemingly disjointed things, that I began this project. In these early stages, it was Deleuze, not Spinoza, who occupied most of my thinking; to a greater or lesser extent, my Spinoza was the one I discovered in Deleuze’s monographs. Though it was not intended as such, this work amounted to a kind of subterfuge—Spinozism was not yet a proper framework for my project, but a Trojan horse by which to import Deleuze’s thinking on difference, immanence, life, and affect into American modernism. In this work I felt a certain anxiety of anachronism, a need for some means of justifying a Deleuzian reading of American texts that never knew Deleuze’s thinking, but perhaps knew Spinoza’s, either in its own right or at some remove, mediated by other texts. If I could import Deleuze’s thinking through Spinoza’s, the project still required a channel for diverting Spinoza into American modernism. This was the context in which I initially turned to Emerson, whose ontology of becoming struck me as a viable point of connection between Spinoza and Deleuze. And yet, the further I explored the historical contexts of the Transcendentalist movement, the deeper and more integral Spinoza’s influence on Emerson seemed to be. The more plausible the notion of a genuine Spinozan strain

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in American literature appeared to me, the more Deleuze came to share the central ground of my thinking with other philosophers and readers of Spinoza.

As the focus of my project expanded from a narrow group of poets (Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams) to include figures like Langston Hughes, Djuna Barnes, and Thornton Wilder, I discovered a sizable body of historical and literary evidence suggesting that Spinoza’s significance to modernist culture was both more pervasive and more complicated than I had originally suspected. As a result, the project proceeded on different ground. What had been a pretextual gesture of using Spinoza as cover for a Deleuzian reading of American modernism became an earnest one of charting the uses that a host of literary figures made of Spinozan immanence. Though Deleuze remained a key figure in my interpretations of Spinoza, he was no longer the central figure of my project. While I had begun by observing resonances and anticipations of Deleuze’s philosophy among the modernists, I now began to trace Spinozan influence within the period I was examining. More and more of the immanent proclivities that I had observed across a range of American literature seemed to be connected, with varying degrees of directness and awareness, to the negotiation of Spinoza’s thinking. The question was not whether Emerson or the modernists were Spinozists as such (I do not believe that they are), but rather of what difference Spinoza’s logic of immanent relations, his physics of affect, or his conception of eternity could have made to them. Wherever I discovered a broadly Spinozan immanence at work, it functioned as a solvent to concepts frozen together in binary opposition: bodies became zones of relations, arrangements of powers blurred across a spatial milieu that could not be described as either here or there; life ceased its quarrel with death and instead took on its trappings as a single vital force for which every mode of composing a relation was necessarily one of decomposing another; and eternity no longer held itself up above time in a
false opposition of time and timelessness, but became time’s immanence to itself, its self-organizing, self-differing structure.

Crucially, the formations of literary thinking that I identify as morbid vitalism, dynamic eternalism, or mo(der)nism are not pure Spinozism—they are alloys, syntheses of many sources. The object of my analysis has never been a philosophy as such, but the literary-aesthetic use of philosophical ideas. Whatever the status of Spinozism in American modernist literature, it is for the most part conceivable only in terms of the mixtures it participates in and makes possible. Just as Spinoza’s conceptualization of immanence is a catalyst for adventurous thinking in Barnes’s writing, or Wilder’s, I believe that this project can be a catalyst for new research into the contexts of modernism in the United States and elsewhere. The Spinozan Strain sets a stage, but one that has yet to be filled with characters and conflicts—it is less an answer to the question of what Spinoza meant to the modernists than a means of posing better, more refined questions, of staging new encounters. This project allows us to ask anew, for instance, how modernism appropriates and modifies elements of fin de siècle arts movements such as Decadence, Symbolism, and Aestheticism. As I begin to articulate in my first chapter, these movements have often been treated as bywords for certain preoccupations or fascinations: Decadence’s morbid delectation in physical, moral, and civilizational decline, Symbolism’s anti-realist, often hieratic urge to elevate mundane experience into mystical significance, and Aestheticism’s insistence that life itself must be regarded as a form of artistic composition. And yet, Spinoza, a rationalist philosopher who says very little about aesthetics, appears time and again in these literatures, either by direct reference or by conspicuous appropriations of his ideas. The list of Decadents, Symbolists, and Aesthetes whose ideas were impacted by Spinoza’s reads like an honour roll: Gustave Flaubert, Octave Mirbeau, Paul Bourget, Maurice Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde, Walter
Pater, George Moore, Edgar Saltus, James Huneker, and more besides. Figures like Wilde, Maeterlinck, Saltus, and Huneker also found much to admire in the writings of Emerson—an especially curious fact considering that Emerson’s reputed optimism is at odds with the Schopenhauerian pessimism that informed movements like Decadence and Symbolism. My research in *The Spinozan Strain* opens up a way of articulating this concatenation of influences, of figuring the peculiar form of monism that emerges from placing Emersonianism in conversation with Spinozism. Moreover, in the wake of an important study like Vincent Sherry’s *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), which argues that modernism itself can be interpreted as a reworking of Decadent aesthetics and sensibilities, the status of Spinoza and Emerson as dual influences on such a wide range of influential fin de siècle writing becomes especially significant. Is there an immanentist, monistic framework of thinking already at work in Decadence and other fin de siècle literary movements? If so, what role do Spinoza and Emerson play in forming it? Most importantly, how might this Spinoza- and Emerson-informed Decadence intersect with the broader Spinozan strain in American modernism? What effects are visible in the work of modernists who sit at the centre of the Venn diagram in which the influences of Decadence, Spinoza, and Emerson intersect? What becomes of the Decadent impulse to make an art from the processes of death and decay when it passes through the broadly vitalistic conceptions of nature in Spinoza and Emerson?

The preliminary work of *The Spinozan Strain* also opens more probing questions about the political and social visions of the sub-formations of modernism that retain a place for the concept of eternity. As I suggest in my second chapter, the tendency to assimilate modernist accounts of dynamic eternalism into a broadly Bergsonian framework can obscure the nuances of modernist approaches to time and eternity, such as Wilder’s. What becomes of eternity when it
ceases to be a beyond of time and is instead taken as its connective tissue or structure? What aesthetic, political, and social considerations might motivate this gesture of insisting on both the plurality of time and its unicity within a single structure? Is there an underlying consistency in the various approaches to lend dynamism and variation to various conceptions of eternity, from the Romanticism-inflected modernism of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and Wallace Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, to the mythopoeic eternities of H.D.’s *Trilogy*? One question that lingered on the fringes of my argument in chapter two pertains to the relationship between dynamic eternalism and modernism’s anxiety about disorder—does eternity continue to hold appeal for modernist writers because it underwrites a seemingly disorderly world with a guarantee of order or structuration, or does the challenge to static eternalism in fact amount to a rejection of the dichotomy of order and disorder altogether? This question bears on the broader definition of modernism, which is often supposed, schematically, to differ from later movements such as postmodernism because it continues to privilege order over disorder, even while ceding representative ground to apparently disorderly experiences and fragmented subjectivities. A broader study of modernism’s efforts to reconcile dynamism with eternity, Spinozan or otherwise, is warranted in order to explore these questions further.

Lastly, my exploration of the relationship between speed, technology, rhythm, and the body raises questions about the ambivalent political uses of speed. Though my third chapter focuses primarily on Crane and Hughes, there is much ground left to cover. A fuller study of the New Negro Renaissance’s attitude toward speed, informed by historical analysis of the shifting distributions of wealth and access to speed technologies from the 1920s into the late 1940s, would be particularly welcome, and necessary to answering the question of how African American attitudes toward dromocratic power develop over a period that saw both
unprecedented prosperity for many African American communities and the beginnings of
ghettoization in the major industrial cities of the northern United States. My chapter’s treatment
of Hughes focused primarily on his use of jazz, with its improvisational flourishes and rhythmic
modulations, as a model for resisting the regimes of dromocratic control that he witnessed in
1940s Harlem. These readings underscore the need for further research into the uses of various
other models for conceptualizing resistant rhythms. Are there dromological implications, for
instance, in the rhythms employed by James Weldon Johnson in *God’s Trombones*, his 1927
cycle of poems rooted in the African American sermonizing tradition? Or in Countee Cullen’s
appropriation of the characteristic rhythms of Anglo-European Romantic lyrics? In what ways do
the innovations of jazz poetry mark a new understanding of speed as a source of political power?
What are the meaningful dromological distinctions that we should draw between Hughes’s
explicitly jazz-derived poetry and his poetic adaptation of blues forms and rhythms? Though
there is already a vibrant body of criticism on the intersections of race, rhythm, and modernism
(Golston), and on the more specific intersections of politics, aesthetics, technology, and
Hughes’s use of jazz and blues forms (Chinitz, Lowney, Brinkman), there has yet been little
attention to the specific political valences of speed in the ways that poets like Hughes treat the
jazz ensemble, for example.

In short, *The Spinozan Strain* points toward a number of encounters in modernist studies
and American literature that promise us a fuller understanding not only of the role of figures like
Spinoza and Emerson in shaping the emergence of modernism in the United States, but also of
the implications of modernism’s subversion of the dichotomies that structured—and in many
ways continue to structure—our understanding of life, space, and time. What emerges is a
modernism for which metaphysics actually matters—not in its own right, but as an incitement to
thinking beyond the mere givens of modernity. The consistent impulse in this modernism is a monistic impulse that derives equally from Spinoza and from Emerson’s creative interpolation of Spinozan ideas. Though many of the attempts to derive a subjectively and politically liberatory aesthetic from this monistic impulse are vexed by incoherence or contradiction, as in the case of Crane’s valorization of the pilot-hero and the speed aesthetic in “Cape Hatteras” or Williams’s ambiguous reliance on the figure of the transcendent narrator throughout *In the American Grain*, these attempts are informative of the tensions and contradictions underlying modernism’s innovations. *The Spinozan Strain* is in many ways a project about these contradictions, from modernism’s simultaneous mistrust of and attraction to transcendent modalities of heroism, to its fascination with the creative possibilities of disorder and revulsion toward any fundamental compromising of the idea of a structured, orderly world. More importantly, though, *The Spinozan Strain* is about the unintuitive modes of thinking that emerge when modernism insists on both terms of its contradictions at once—this non-contradiction of opposites is perhaps the defining quality of monistic modernism, the aesthetic formation that I derived from the Spinozan strain. Whatever else may follow from this strain, whatever subterranean passages it follows through modernism, wherever it renews or exhausts itself, it is my hope that these things, trajectories, and destinations are not ends, but means to something more.
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