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“And Now Here is the Unreal Real”:

The Transformation of American Realisms, 1892-1925

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Gabriel Stone Mehlman

2018
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“And Now Here is the Unreal Real”:
The Transformation of American Realisms, 1892-1925

by

Gabriel Stone Mehlman

Doctor of Philosophy in English
University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Michael A North, Co-Chair
Professor Mark I Seltzer, Co-Chair

At the turn of the century, we see American literary realisms that become increasingly autopoeitic—that generate themselves from their own components, that keep on referencing themselves, and entering themselves back into themselves. And they are self-reflexive realisms that see themselves—both their worlds and their rhetoric—and are stunned by what they see, and do not quite understand what they see. These realisms are fascinated with their own form, specifically the uncannily animated linguistic figuration that fissions off from mimesis to build the very world in which mimesis is visible. The fictions remain representationally grounded in mimesis, but try to determine the rhetoric that might figure a world in which what they must name and how they might name that are changing. At the level of plot, we see small-scale
dramas—accidents within small groups, social visits throughout a small town, family and professional disputes. Yet these realisms observe their world and its language changing in astonishingly uncanny ways, and become fascinated with a reflexive speculation on their own generic and medial fate. This is the strange new landscape of turn of the century realisms that this dissertation discovers and maps.
The dissertation of Gabriel Stone Mehlman is approved.

Jonathan Hamilton Grossman

Efrain Kristal

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University of California, Los Angeles

2018
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Much love to my uncle Jerry, who still teaches me how to be a mensch. My sister, Aurora, brings me older joy, and my niece, Sahale, brings me new joy.

This project is for my parents, Maxwell and Cheryl. All that is best in me comes from them.
Vita

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In Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel,” first published in 1899, a man referred to as the Swede is lodging for a night at a hotel on the prairie, along with three other men and the hotel’s owner. He is wildly agitated from the outset, convinced for no clear reason that he will be killed that very evening. After provoking a fistfight with one of the other lodgers, the Swede leaves the hotel, wanders into a bar, and goads a man referred to as the Gambler. The Gambler fatally stabs the Swede with “a long blade,” an act that demonstrates how “a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon.”1 Everyone then flees the bar—except the Swede, of course. Consider this astonishing sentence, which works like a small, strange cosmology:

The corpse of the Swede, alone in the saloon, had its eyes fixed upon a dreadful Legend that dwelt a-top of the cash machine: ‘This registers the amount of your purchase.’2

To begin with, this highly recursive sentence has the grammatical and semantic structure of a joke. The clauses prior to the colon are the setup, and then the cash machine shows the quoted punchline. The machine, at once a mimetic object and a linguistic figure with multiple levels of reference, also self-reflexively figures the production of punchlines more generally: one punches in the buttons of the setup (here, about a Swede who was set down), and that linear series of actions is converted into the punchline. This sentence, which contains a machine, is itself a machine of its own making, generating itself from itself, or, to use the word the sentence favors,

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2 Ibid., 826.
purchasing itself from itself. The Swede has purchased his murder; the scene has purchased a joke; the joke has purchased its punchline; the dreadful legend has purchased its content; and, at the most generally self-reflexive level, the sentence has purchased itself. This sentence builds a world out of itself.

The cash machine also functions as a linguistic figure for figuration. It converts one thing (what it is registering) to a different thing (the amount of the purchase, or the quotation on the legend announcing the amount of the purchase) that stands in for the first thing. In this respect, the machine also figures the sentence, because the second part and the first part are distinct tenors that each convert the other into a vehicle. But there is a problem here. Among all these levels of self-reference, and recursive loops of self-making, exactly what “This” is remains unclear—we do not know what it points to. “This” becomes a floating, spectral deictic. Additionally, the punchline of the joke is unclear. In other words, the sentence also registers the problem of knowing what it figures, and knowing how it figures that. And it is also a sentence about trying to name or understand its own rhetoric and reference. It becomes engaged in a grammatical or interpretive forensics, the crime scene of a sentence about a crime scene. So it is at once corpse, killer, and detective. This scene and sentence, which cannot quite add itself up, which struggles to figure itself and in that very process generates itself, makes a world that is made up of its very uncertain making, and is concerned with observing that uncertainty.

This is also a small world that is uncannily alive—a register that talks and puns on the story in which it appears (“a dreadful legend”), the still-life of a corpse that still looks at the register, and a sentence that looks at itself. And this scene is one premised on social activity in the world—the result of a murder, the scene of a crime, and a scene that radiates with the affect of the dead Swede’s splayed-out embarrassment. In this respect, mimesis and the self-reflexivity
and animation of rhetoric are entirely bound up with one another. Syntax and reference combine into the rictus of an operating sentence; as the reader’s eye passes across the sentence, so does the dead Swede’s reading eye pass across the room. The image and the sentence in which it is signified make a self-reflexive quotation of how reading and point of view in literary realism works, and the queerly embalmed, wholly exposed, excruciated, and uncanny world in which Crane’s realism might be said to culminate.

At the turn of the century, we see a realism that becomes increasingly autopoeitic—that generates itself from its own components, that keeps on referencing itself, entering itself back into itself. And it is a self-reflexive realism that sees itself, both its world and its rhetoric, and is stunned by what it sees—like the Swede, who sees even in death, and like the sentence, which sees itself but does not quite understand what it sees. This realism is fascinated with its own form, specifically the uncannily animated linguistic figuration that fissions off from mimesis to build the world in which mimesis is visible. The realism remains representationally grounded in mimesis, but tries to determine the rhetoric to figure a world in which what it must name and how it names that are changing. At the level of plot, we see small-scale dramas—accidents within small groups, social visits throughout a small town, family and professional disputes. Yet the fiction observes its world and its language changing in astonishingly uncanny ways. This is the strange new landscape of turn of the century realism. It is both unreal in its supremely uncanny effects and completely realist in its production of its reality—what Crane announces when he writes in one story “And now here is the unreal real.”

Uncanny rhetorical effects like those in the sentence above are everywhere in Crane’s work, as well as in the work of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather, the two other writers I will be taking up in this study. These effects are premised on uncanny new worlds that are fascinated by observing themselves, both the events they represent and the rhetoric that constructs them. Crane will be the primary focus of this introduction, because he so remarkably registers a fascination with world-making, reflexivity, and the visibility of linguistic figures. I want to use another of his sketches, “Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait,” to set out in greater detail the type of self-referencing, self-generating worlds that I will be exploring in this project, and how they are embedded in a realism that in part determines their self-descriptions. Like most of Crane’s newspaper pieces, the sketch works like fiction (and, in essence, is fiction). First published on October 28, 1894, a time when Stephen Crane had yet to achieve literary celebrity, it details an interview that Crane conducted with Howells in the latter’s study.

William Dean Howells leaned his cheek upon the two outstretched fingers on his right hand and gazed thoughtfully at the window—the panes black from the night without, although studded once or twice with little electric stars far up on the west side of the Park. He was looking at something which his memory had just brought him.⁴

The scene, in its allegorical tightness, telescopes and makes almost overly literal what Nancy Glazener calls the “fairly precise primary location” of “nineteenth-century U.S. realism.”⁵ Relatively little needs to be known about the scene to set out the reflexive allegory that it stages. Seated in his study, Howells, the so-called “Dean of American Realism”—author, publisher, impresario, and “developer of realist taste”—is presented here not just as an exponent of literary

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realism as a practice, but also a figure for its institutional controls and aesthetic ideology.⁶ The sketch is told in the third person; the interviewer (Crane), referred to only as “the other man,” is looped between the external perspective of that third person and the internal focalization of “the other man” (615). The external writerly perspective, the locus of productive agency framing the sketch, is in effect licensed by Howells, because Crane, as a young realist writing, is a participant in the institution that Howells figures, and therefore he is an actual instance of that institution. This makes the interview scene one of upstart mastery taking place within the authorized channels of realism, as if “the other man” will by the end of the sketch be named “Stephen Crane.” Because the sketch is an instance of the authorization Howells symbolizes, it is the report of itself—it produces itself and is about that self-production. In that respect we see its strikingly condensed, and strikingly visible, reflexivity. This scene is characteristic of the type of autopoeisis we will see figured in Crane, Jewett, and Cather—the recursive generation of a system from its own components, here, the necessarily graphic way these works seem to make themselves from themselves, to generate their own world. The scene equivocates between description and figuration, mimesis and allegory—on the office as a likeness of the institution, on the instant as a likeness of the genre, on the interview as a likeness of the story itself.

Yet this seamless structure of reflexivity—uncanny and remarkable in its own right—embeds a strange rhetorical trope that seems almost camouflaged. The office where Crane conducted his interview with Howells faced the southern edge of Central Park. The paragraph’s first sentence is bisected by a dash —, and the two sides of the dash are almost identical in syllabic length. This metrical mirroring analogizes another iconic mirroring: as scenic vision moves across the portrait in tandem with the left-right vector of the sentence as read, we notice a

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spatial progression that begins with Howells’ head, moves to the fingers, and ends at the window, while, chiasmically, the second half begins with the panes, moves to the two or three lamps (“the electric stars”), and then ends with “the west side of the Park,” the visibility of which is supported by the lamps. Just as Howells is an image of the world, the contents of the outside gathered as an entity are an image of Howells—a registration, we might say, with a nod to “The Blue Hotel.” It is a virtually biomorphic foil of Howells, and it is so strange and graphic, and so inhuman, that it is like a metaphor materialized, looming outside. A figure and Howells are irreconcilable likenesses of one another.

There is a precedent in studies of American literary realism for noticing the uncanniness of the entry of rhetorical figures into the worlds of Crane’s fiction. John Berryman, for instance, wrote of Crane that “[h]is animism is like nothing else in civilized literature. Mountains, trees, dogs, men, horses, and boats flash in and out of each other’s identities.”7 Later, Michael Fried in effect saw figurations in Crane, like lines of soldiers on the battlefield in *The Red Badge of Courage* figuring sentences composed by pen, as well as a range of other effects—Crane’s name, initials, the surface of his desk, the surfaces of paper all as visible figures in his work. For Fried, these effects were ultimately “not a thematics of writing in general but more particularly a problematic of the materiality of writing as that materiality enters into…Crane’s prose.”8 In turn, this led Fried to see Crane’s fear of a dangerous absorption into writing, an unspecified ontological vortex. In my account, the figure outside the window concerns linguistic figuration as such, because it figures the very entrance of uncanny rhetorical effects into turn of the century

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American literary realism, and their visibility. In this scene in which everything recursively cross-references the institution of realism, the figure outside, in all its strangeness, becomes a part of that institution. In turn, so does the outside it gathers up as its materials. The figure is a metaphoric re-presentation of the character of Howells, but as an abstraction and figuration of Howells, the realist master, it becomes a reflexive metaphor unto itself for that abstraction and figuration. In other words, it is a figure of figures—and so it is, almost viscerally, a figure for the entrance into turn of the century American realism of linguistic figuration, and the materiality of grammar itself. Figuration and grammar become animated and observed, and enter into the fiction as if they were objects and entities in their own right. At the same time, the uncanny outside figure references a William Dean Howells—a torchbearer for realism—who is dispersed across referential and structural levels of the story, splayed out as an effect of its autopoeisis, to such an extent that he becomes uncanny, something less or more than a realist character, something like his own alien face. In his influential book, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels saw the logic of consumer capitalism reflected in a tropic tendency in realism. In Michaels’ account, both realism and the culture in which it is inextricably situated are governed by what is essentially a wish to become self-identical: “It is the logic of the gold standard, the desire to make yourself equal to your face value, to become gold.” 9 Here there is no such desire, because the face is only beginning to see itself as an alien one, which is premised on a distinction from itself, and, if it is anything, that face is stunned and fascinated by its alien face turned to face it.

This moment is an excess or a redoubling of likeness in terms seemingly at too much variance from the language of mimesis. It is, as Dennis Donoghue describes metaphor, a “new

form of life,” in the sense that it presents life differently and different life. The figure outside reminds us of an uncannily objectified instance of what Paul de Man says of anthropomorphism, that it is “no longer a trope but an identification at the level of substance.” The alien likeness, the visible linguistic figure, is entered into and constitutive of this world and how it works. This sketch graphically shows how these linguistic figures, these doublings of mimesis, inhabit the very offices of realism itself, and can be observed as a “new form of life” and, at a further order of observation, as the rhetorical tropes that constructs that new life. In Stuart Burrows’ recent account of photography and the American novel, he names “the photographic figure”: “In a world in which nothing can be distinguished from anything else, metaphor—which depends upon there being a difference between two separate things just as mimesis depends upon there being a difference between a thing and its representation—becomes increasingly hard to imagine.” Yet metaphor pervades these fictions. Flooded with figures, which distances the world from itself in its very making, these fictions end up dramatizing a turn away from themselves, through instances and allegories of the supersession of their genre, into new rhetorical methods, new narrative voices—often techniques that will presage literary modernism. On occasion, they will wander into fantastical worlds had not appeared in literature before them and did not appear again in literatures after.

I want to clarify what I mean by “world.” The word is used in literary criticism at present with tremendous frequency, but its specific meaning is sometimes difficult to determine in the contexts in which it appears, and its different critical appearances are varied and often

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incompatible. In this study, I do not take up the question of American realism and the “worlded,” in the sense of any geographical or internationalist perspective and debate on American realisms’s relationship with the global. Rather, the idea of world as I engage with it here has two reciprocal components, one narratological and one more historicizable and transportable across forms: world in the sense of storyworld and world in the sense of the official world. By storyworld I invoke a narratological term used by David Herman “to suggest something of the world-creating power of narrative…the here and now that constitute the deictic center of the world being told about.” That deictic center—the pointing of deixis, the here and now—is where we read for mimesis. This is reading for mimesis as verisimilitude—character, objects, descriptions—and Paul Ricoeur’s sense of mimesis as the emplottment of actions in narrative time and as constitutive of narrative time. Simultaneously, in this project storyworld confronts a definition of world as Mark Seltzer’s sense of the official world, “a self-inciting, self-legislating and self-depictive form of life,” in which the practice of realism looks like “the description of the self-description and self-indexing of everything.” That world, which is loudly announced in turn of the century American realism, we can see pertains to both visibility and likeness as its preconditions: for the world to map itself, it must see its linguistic figuration. The distinction between the two senses of world (story and official), as far as this project goes, somewhat resembles the old one of story and discourse. But what appears as a distinction is more of a mobius strip, a certain tension and interdependence, since, in literature, on an evidentiary basis, each is only visible through the other—though of course the storyworld and the novel is part of

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the world in a broader sense, as a medial form within it that in part constitutes it. One effect in
the realisms I will be exploring is that Herman’s deixis, which is reader-oriented (“the
interpreter”) moves inside the form of the fiction. This deictic migration makes for a self-
reflexive fiction in which the mimetic elements of the storyworld are able to observe their own
abstraction, and in which that observation is a reflexive account of realism observing its own
growing antinomies. In turn, the world observes its own construction, and can then reflect on its
generic and medial destiny, as both a representational mode and a medial object within the
temporality of the literary system and the broader durée of historical time.

2.

The sketch ends—“‘Mr. Howells,’” said the other man suddenly, “have you observed a
change in the literary pulse of the country within the last four months. Last winter, for instance, it
seemed that realism was almost about to capture things, but then recently I have thought that I
saw coming a sort of counter-wave, a flood of the other—a reaction, in fact. Trivial, temporary,
but a reaction, certainly.” Howells responds “‘What you say is true. I have seen it coming…I
suppose we shall have to wait.’” (617) But if Howells and the realists plan on waiting for
dominance in the literary marketplace, or a strong influence on the direction of literary
production, then they will have to wait forever. As Lawrence Buell writes of American realism,
“viewed in the most comprehensive terms…the main storyline between 1865 and 1920 is
increasing marketplace differentiation, as the number of writers, readers, and publishing venues
proliferated; as the players and to some extent also the publishers became more dispersed
nationwide beyond their initially northeastern base; and as the realist aesthetic fashionable from
the start of the period and predominant to the end started to fission in the later nineteenth
century.” That declining realist aesthetic is the genteel realism of Howells, and the project of classic realism—the Howells who wrote in “Realism: The Moral Issue” that “[w]e must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the motive, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?” Within the “realist aesthetic,” we can include subgenres of realism like local color, which found their fortunes equally waning at the turn of the century.

Yet the vicissitudes of the marketplace do not in and of themselves provide a sufficient account of the fissioning or internal transformations of realism. Malcolm Bradbury writes that during the decline of literary realism “[f]iction was becoming less the expression of a common reality all could recognize, more of a response to the uncommon realities and systems that lay behind modern life and called for revelation.” Literary realism never expressed a common reality, but its construction of reality might have better corresponded to the shared knowledge of a reality among the readers whose reality it helped to construct. For Kaplan—who herself perhaps overstates realism’s coherence—“realistic narratives enact this search not by fleeing into the imagination or into nostalgia for a lost past but by actively constructing the coherent social world they represent.” But at the turn of the century the narrative form and topical concerns of realism are transforming into new and strange realities—registers uncertain what it is they are adding up or what they are themselves adding up to. As Niklas Luhmann argues, “…twentieth century art can no longer be described as fictional at all, since fictionality presupposed that we

know what the world ought to look like in order for fiction to be able to count as a correct description of the world." As much as "Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait" is a sketch that both allegorizes and works toward the autopoeisis of the institution of literary realism, it is simultaneously a self-reflexive dramatization of realism’s transformation and fissioning at the level of plot, and, recursively, a self-reflexive instance of it at the level of form. This, then, is the reality of turn of the century realism—realisms, and realities, generally very strange and uncanny ones, at once self-making and self-discovering. To describe the forms and concerns of these worlds and how they work, then, is an inquiry into the historical trajectory of American narrative form.

Anthony Giddens writes that “The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.” As with modern social life, reflexivity also becomes a condition of modern narrative form (which is itself a constituent feature of modern social life in its circulation as a medial object, in print and to a lesser degree acoustic media in the moment of Crane, Jewett, and Cather). We might channel Giddens and say that the reflexivity of modern narrative form consists in the fact that it constantly examines and reforms itself in the light of incoming information about its very construction, thus constitutively altering its character. This is one way to describe the self-reflexive and self-descriptive properties of turn of the century realisms—like a register and a sentence that registers itself, and makes itself from itself, or an office that forms itself and sees the weird effects of that formation. But narrative form also examines and enters into itself figures of new social practices, new


materialities (medial, technological), and new modes of organizing and producing information about reality. As it observes these entering into itself, its character is altered (and its characters, what they do, and what they are concerned with are altered).

We can think of this as the condition of narrative form in the epoch of functional differentiation—the differentiation of society into a number of operationally autonomous function systems, like the mass media (crucial in its reality-shaping function), law, science, politics, religion, art, to name a few of the most impactful. The “incoming information” Giddens describes, some of the major inputs we see into Crane, Jewett, and Cather (and realisms more generally), can be thought of in terms of what in systems theory is called structural coupling, which David Wellberry describes as follows: “Structural coupling occurs at the border between autonomous systems and enables them to affect one another without, as it were, entering into each other’s (after all, autonomous) operations. This indirect affection occurs via an interface to which the operations of both systems are attached. Language is just such an interface, not the only one, but certainly the most important…”

22 The interface or irritation between other institutional formations and medial objects is essential for this project as a means of understanding the formal transformations and the life and death of worlds in American realisms. We will see cosmological spectacles of shame in Crane, bound up with the reality-creation of the mass media, and the weird loop of authorship, identity, narrative structure, and visible materialities of communication; in Jewett we will see a startling, expansive awareness of systems and their flourishing lives and entropic deaths—social, psychic, economic, literary; in Cather, we will see the institutionalization of literature in the university turn into an allegory of human

extinction. These accounts all presuppose what Mark McGurl calls the novel’s “analogical relation, as a generic institution, to other social-institutional, architectural, and geographical spaces.”\(^{23}\) Not least of all these spaces will be the literary system itself, in which these works are enfolded—the functionally differentiated system that comprises writers, readers, genres, styles, the critical apparatus, and the publishing apparatus. Within such formations, what this project will be setting out is the world-making process, internal dilemmas, and astonishing formal apprehension of the nature of worlds, grammar, and the reflexivity of modernity.

In her recent *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction*, Kate Marshall writes that “[t]he sustained interest in figures of thought and cultural practice as figures—the metaphors, homonyms, and other forms of wordplay—that dominate so many cultural histories of media and make them so compelling, have also been surfacing in literary study as part of a renewed attention to form and its materialities.”\(^{24}\) In this respect, my study is formalist, but part of what separates my work is a certain account of Wellberry’s claim that “Language is just such an interface, not the only one, but certainly the most important…” The works I will be taking up are intensely self-reflexive, and are stunned and fascinated with their own linguistic construction. Rhetoric and narrative form itself enters back into them as a media that is virtually autonomous, and that doubles as both media, about which a novel can be reflexive, and think of its own writing and form, and a form of life or action, which can enter into the world to act: dead corpses that look, cash registers that talk, sentences and offices that make themselves, and portraits outside, rhetorical tropes and medial reflexivity in the strangest of ways. This is the uncanny doubling effect of literature’s reflexive encounter with itself—the reflexive coupling of rhetoric


\(^{24}\) Kate Marshall, *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 22.
with itself, mimesis with figuration, the interaction of characters and figures of life. In some respects, this returns to an aspect of deconstruction, its own formalism, and itself also a form of second-order observation. Those austere rhetorical readings of a deconstructionist critic like Paul de Man—themselves almost hallucinatory and fantastical in their animating of figures—might then be turned back in on this work, without the deconstructionist search for aporia or suspension. Instead, we would find the specifics of a historicity of literary forms, and a greater interaction of an uncannily activated rhetoric with plot and mimesis in this vein. My purpose here is not to diagnose the end of literary realism, but to show how internal pressures register a shift away from known worlds towards new ones, the internal relationship and antinomies within worlds.

3.

I have so far focused on more discrete figures—a still-life of a body, and an office, both of which made up a small world. However, the referential range of these works broadens significantly, in ways that also demonstrates their systems-like properties, their large scale, and their perception of what constitutes their world.

Consider Crane’s 1898 story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” a stark example of reflexive registration of generic change, and one that also has the advantage of opening up some of the systems-like properties of these worlds and how they work.

The story here is about the sheriff of a fictional town named Yellow Sky, who returns on a train from an unannounced wedding to a woman from San Antonio. No one is more surprised at this turn of events than Big Jim, a bruiser in town with whom the sheriff has a regular, ritualized shootout, which repeats again and again—like a stage-show, like the predictable cycle of
sensational newspaper stories, and like the heterotopic time of an American mythos. It is that mythic quality—the reiterative, Sisypysian quality of the gunfight—that is punctured by the specter of modernization, indicated by the very entrance of a locomotive from San Antonio, with its Pullman porters and modern interior, and with a woman from San Antonio who seems much realer than the stage characters who people the fictional town of Yellow Sky. Here is a description of the town:

Across the sandy street were some vivid green grass plots, so wonderful in appearance amid the sands that burned near them in a blazing sun that they caused a doubt in the mind. They exactly resembled the grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage. At the cooler end of the railway station a man without a coat sat in a tilted chair and smoked his pipe. The fresh-cut bank of the Rio Grande circled near the town, and there could be seen beyond it a great, plum-colored plain of mesquite.25

The internal figuration of the scene is of the scene doubled as its own theatrical stage, its landscape and people like props. The story will observe its own events unfolding as if it were the spectator of the play that is itself, its own double. More remarkable is the way in which the town-stage, set forth as almost hallucinatory, includes a distinction between system and environment. There is something on the other side of the stage—the undifferentiated “great, plum-colored plain of mesquite,” like an alien landscape. For systems theory, every system draws a distinction between itself and its environment, a difference, and the system’s self-restriction allows it to produce its own codes and operations. Indeed, for Niklas Luhmann, “systems differentiation is nothing more than the repetition within systems of the difference between system and environment.”26 Among the systems-like properties of the realisms I will be taking up—autopoeitic, self-reflexive narrative forms—is their graphic, almost allegorical deployment and

fascination with system/environment distinctions. They have a persistent fascination with establishing their own insides and outsides. At the end of the story, it is Big Jim himself, crestfallen because the sheriff has dropped his guns and announced that the shootout will occur no longer, who wanders off into the “great, plum-colored plain of mesquite” “beyond it”—he departs from the world, into some strange, fantastical environment. Yet Big Jim’s exit into the mesquite is a figure for the mesquite being brought into the story—in part as the very figure of an alien world apart from realism—a dramatization of a story form that is ceasing to recognize itself, and the importation of an alien world into the known one. These fictions enact a world-transformation by bringing the outside inside, collapsing the two, or destabilizing their relation—like the uncanny outdoors in the Howells sketch and “Yellow Sky”’s unmapped plum-colored plain of mesquite. They reflexively play out their own transformations by entering their outsides within themselves, or figure a movement into their outsides—outsides that stand in for formations other than themselves, whether generic, linguistic, biological, social, historical. The paradox is that their world is always the unity of the two, of the outside and the inside, which makes the estrangement of realism a self-estrangement, and makes that self-estrangement an operative condition of their world-making, and the playing out of its unmaking.

We now see a larger array of the referential levels at which these worlds are working. The concrete linguistic figure, like the cash register, or the Howells-portrait, has as a counterpart a scalar expansion, a stage-like doubling of the entire storyworld, and a division of that world into itself and an outside (inside). In turn, this entire piece, in its fable-like quality, allegorizes and instances the supersession of itself. These shifts, between the small and the large, the individual figure and the world, sentence and structure, are typical of the worlds of Crane, Jewett, and Cather. They also topically meditate on time, transition, change, like the end of poor Big Jim and
the gunfight as the incoming modernity of the Pullman. On that train there is a distinctly modern (and distinctly Cranean) sentence that Big Jim, in his fabular time, could never read, one that everywhere doubles itself and has doublings within it, and makes for a story that winks at itself winking at itself—“a passenger, noting this play, grew excessively sardonic, and winked at himself in one of the numerous mirrors.”  

As realist mimesis is pulled away from a faith in its referential adequation—the mapping of the real that William Dean Howells called “the simple, the natural, and the honest”—it generates worlds of stunned self-discovery. The figural process in Crane, Jewett, and Cather rests on the discovery that the elements of narrative form can figure themselves, but that such figuration makes that form incommensurate with itself.

The reflexive accounts these works offer of their own generic and stylistic transformations towards modernism are staged both technically, in their stylistic and rhetorical effects, and allegorically, through world-creation and world-transformation, which cross-references generic and formal transformation. We will see the vanishing of character systems, reconfigurations and evaporations of consciousness, escapes into newly made rhetorical biospheres, terminal reductions into the hard stuff of the earth. We will see dying towns become nodes of information, unhappy professors become inhuman, shamed fallen men become transformed into the stylus on a phonograph—auguries of the entrance into the twentieth century and its strange realities. But these works are also about determining figurations for new social forms, grappling with the uncanniness of new rhetoric that stages new likenesses, and understanding the reality of systems and the systematicity of literature. I see these works less in terms of their constructing of a controlled or managed reality, less in terms of their management


of social contradictions. I see less of a consistent and coherent desire for institutional distinction as their guiding momentum. I also see these works as ones that can be better understood if a focus on rhetorical form accompanies accounts of the formal impact of material media or incoming social and institutional forces. The scale and scope of these works is vast in its smallness, their linguistic complexity dizzying, and their uncanniness exceedingly strange in its effects. I show the extent to which these works are as concerned with a reflexive speculation on their own form and medial fate as they are on the social dramas they depict, and how the dramas become virtually cosmological once we realize this. This study also provides a new way of understanding how turn of the century realism works, in the sense of how astonishingly diverse and uncanny its rhetorical effects are, the massive levels of reference it mobilizes within itself, the degree of self-reference and cross-reference that spins out worlds from crowds, streets, houses, towns, little islands. And I want to show how this opens a strange and visionary pathway into the destiny of realism and incoming twentieth century modernisms, even if that modernism is itself ultimately a realism of the construction of realities. This is a study of mapping the emergent worlds of turn of the century realism—their systems-like operation, their reflexivity concerning tropes, the world-making and world-unmaking this permits. I draw from a range of sources—the long history of literary criticism on realism and naturalism (including that of the genre’s original practitioners), systems theory and works of literary and media studies inflected by it, theories of rhetoric, institutional histories, and narratology—to try to offer a description of the life and death of these worlds.

My first chapter, “Stephen Crane’s Fallen Men,” spans a rough arc of Crane’s career, beginning with his newspaper sketches of the early 1890s and ending with his last stories, written as he was dying from tuberculosis. Crane is less generically self-reflexive than Jewett or Cather,
but this is because he is less a generic practitioner and more a stunned wanderer into alien territory. I show how Crane is his own experimental subject, everywhere encountering and registering the uncanny rhetorical and narrative effects of reflexive modernity at the turn of the century. His world sees itself, like characters on stage, and the rhetoric that constructs it, and is at once rapt and horrified. Crane’s is a world becoming visible to itself, but everything is becoming visible to itself—people, object, grammar. I argue that a central concern in Crane is a deep uncertainty about naming objects and forms in this exposed world, and, specifically, a deep uncertainty about figuration. I argue that his storyworlds re-enter themselves as a figure, at which everyone looks—specifically, figurations of the group behavior and cosmologies of shame characteristic of the newspaper story, as well as of the media spectacles of shame that defined Crane’s own celebrity. These abstractions themselves become a subject of fascination—both the fascination of the world looking at a likeness of itself, and the reflexive fascination of literature looking at its own tropic rendering. As Crane’s career continues, the world begins to produce likenesses that have no identifiable referent; they become figures of an inhuman media, and it is through this that Crane plays out a speculative transformation of the realist world, and the authorial self, diffused and disappeared, and overtaken by an impersonal voice and face. I show how this doubled abstraction—of person and world—comes to look curiously like a precursor of modernist techniques of abstraction and impersonality. Throughout, I thread these discussions to Crane’s own experience of literary celebrity, and the feedback loops of public exposure and self-definition that were central to his work and brief life.

In my second chapter, “Life and Death in Dunnet Landing, Maine, 1896,” I focus on Sarah Orne Jewett’s local color novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. We have passed from the excruciated public worlds of Crane to the seemingly pacific, intimate world of Dunnet Landing,
Maine. Yet local color, a genre about dying worlds, was itself a dying genre at the moment of the novel’s publication. I argue that the novel, which everywhere cross-references its dying world to its dying genre, registers a startling awareness of systems—literary, biological, social, and psychic—and how they live and die. The novel unfolds extraordinary levels of reference, including within its small world a cosmos—of the individual life, the town, the genre, the literary system, the fate of the realist novel as an aesthetic formation in history, Sarah Orne Jewett, and the medial object that is *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I show how a novel about the death of worlds and genres also includes an outside within itself—an image of its own generic others, of worlds outside inside itself, and how it defines itself in relation to what it is not. I show how the novel instances and allegorizes its own generic supersession, and in doing so allegorizes the collapse of many of the predicates of realist novels—communities, readers, subjectivities. I then show how the novel sees its generic future and performs its becoming future, as an autonomous world of language and vision, like some science-fiction or speculative fiction vision of a modernism.

In my third and final chapter, “Willa Cather and the Inhuman Novel,” I focus on Willa Cather’s 1925 novel *The Professor’s House*. Cather’s novel arrives in 1925, a banner year for American literary modernism—a year that saw the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, *In Our Time*, and *Manhattan Transfer*. Cather has been claimed as both a realist and modernist, but what is significant about *The Professor’s House* is that it offers its own self-descriptions, which are derived from her 1923 manifesto “The Novel Démeublé.” *The Professor’s House* makes clear that by 1925 we have arrived at a moment when the realist novel can knowingly include, or cannot not include, a programmatic self-description. The novel allows us to mark and describe an important point in the formal and conceptual trajectory of the American novel—the point at
which the realist novel becomes exhausted with the compulsory professing of itself, and tries to find an outside to itself, or, barring that, to extinguish itself. I argue that the novel shows an exhaustion with the realist novel and its self-reflexivity—and that, in all essential topical and allegorical spaces of realism, from the family to the office, it stages an inhuman version of itself, a lethally asocial vision, as if it might offer a counter-novel or an anti-novel. Yet even this cannot step outside of an institutional vision, and is always entered back into the very strange offices of the human novel.
In 1899, with less than a year left to live, Stephen Crane wrote a story called “The Upturned Face,” which was first published shortly after his death. In this story, which is both a little cosmology and a little eschatology, four soldiers are burying the body of a dead comrade, Bill, whose dead “face was chalk-blue; gleaming eyes stared at the sky.”

The men dig a grave, and soon “The grave was finished. It was not a masterpiece—poor little shallow thing” (1284). They lower Bill into his embarrassing grave, one man delivers a makeshift, halting funeral oration, and then the men are confronted with the task of shoveling dirt onto Bill. The men, in a state of collective embarrassment—at precisely what is unspecified—with “inexplicable hesitation” demur from shoveling earth upon “this corpse which from its chalk-blue face looked keenly out from the grave” (1285). Finally, “in a movement which was like a gesture of abhorrence, [the sergeant] flung the dirt into the grave and as it landed it made a sound—plop” (1286). The burial continues, but “[a]lways the earth made that sound—plop.” The final paragraph:

The adjutant understood. He was pale to the lips. “Go on, man,” he cried, beseechingly, almost in a shout…Lean swung back the shovel; it went forward in a pendulum curve. When the earth landed it made a sound—plop. (1287)

Here embarrassed genesis (and Genesis) and embarrassed eschatology are indistinguishable in the “plop” that is the obscene performative of the world. The social pragmatics of the speech act as such, and its cosmological corollary, are relayed by dumb, gross matter and presided over by a

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metaphysics of embarrassment—in the beginning was the plop, the world will end with a plop. As if demiurgically, the “pendulum curve” puts in motion the inauguration of time and the first churning of creation, followed by the third day of the primeval history—“go on, man.” This back-and-forth of world-making is also a burial that lands with a plop like the shitting—an embarrassing act—that Crane fairly explicitly suggests everything is. It is the general excrement of speech and communication, and a clump of shit that is form as such, including Crane himself, who once wrote “I am clay—very common uninteresting clay.”  

The plop is a miniaturization and mockery of worlds and their making, and its radius is expansive enough to mock all of the meanings we might ascribe to the word “world.” The beginning and the end of the world has the structure of a joke—unfunny funniness—and the plop is a metonym for punchlines as such, just as the men look at the concretized punchline of the very joke they are in. Standing out from its scenic field like a stereoscopic image, the plop always enfolds the entirety of the place where it lands. So the plop is also the grand, ironizing allegory of any allegory, a type and antitype at once to any given narrative, representation, or communication. It is the thing of which any other thing, at the last, is a visible likeness. And the plop, in its plosive roundness, its obscene drip, seems as material as the soil that makes the noise, as if the prose itself is covered in shit. The joke is on everyone, not least of all us.

I take one of the most crucial aspects of Crane’s realism to be its seemingly unprecedented economy of exposure, fictions in which everything and everyone can be seen by everyone and everything else. In the story, even the dead face seems to be looking at the men

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who cannot help but look at it. Nor do I speak exclusively of mimetic elements in the storyworld, like people—the world is self-reflexive both as a storyworld and as a rhetorical structure. We will see how exposure makes reference and rhetoric available to one another, how each enters into the other, like the plop the men see and hear, which is a tactile metonym of the joke in which both it and they figure. To see and be seen, which is how this self-reflexive world generates itself, is always shameful in Crane. But scenes of accident and embarrassment are what keep on generating the world. “The Upturned Face” dramatizes a world that works in this way, and it presages the social forms among people within it—a contagion of exposure, that spreads across levels of the fiction, from story to structure, animating both. Like the buried man, and the men condemned to bury him, to be seen is to be trapped, to be shackled and on view within the world. This bondage and visibility also will evoke a terrible desire to escape, from the confines of exposure, from social forms and the language that is recursively bound up with them. I want to explore this exposed, excruciated, self-making world, which emerges at the turn of the century and defines Crane’s uncanny work—and his own life, which was as publicly visible as his fiction, and publicly visible within his fiction, as well. Crane is like a visitor to the alien territory of a new world, which has always been his own.

1.

Crane’s career as a writer began on the boardwalks of Asbury Park during his early teenage years, where he wrote for the New York Tribune. That apprenticeship ended in controversy on August, 21, 1892, when he wrote an article that satirized the politically-connected Junior Order of United American Mechanics parade. He was subsequently blacklisted from the
Tribune. He then moved to New York City, where he began to craft both his persona and his distinctive prose style, immersing himself in all the spectacles the city had to offer. It was a place he privileged because there people lived visibly—“open and plain, with nothing hidden.”³ Crane was drawn to crowds, to tableaus of groups and individuals suddenly stricken and exposed, to the haunts of the disreputable and the down-and-out, and in this way he established an experiential basis for his fiction. Crane enters into his prose experiments as a subject; this is the difference between naturalism in the laboratory and the naturalism of the reporter, whose content and claims to distinction and self-definition are founded in immersion. In Crane’s fiction, self-reference and other-reference are difficult to distinguish. Characters often seem to be proxies or surrogates for Crane, and characters contagiously mirror and reproduce the behavior of others. Crane’s immersive tendencies were so dogged that he was virtually assimilated to his subject, becoming “indifferent to his appearance…part of the wretched masses.”⁴ Some of his friends speculated that the lifestyle entailed by this commitment to collapsing the distance between self and other was in part responsible for his early death from tuberculosis at 28. The formal consequence, in terms of narrative perspective, is a unified division between the self as a third-person presence in a characterological field and the self operating as a second-order observer, which includes observing one’s own character. The looped composite is the very form of authorial definition and one aspect of the agony of recursive entrapment—in body, in scene, in print, in linguistic figuration—that is a motif running throughout Crane’s fiction.

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⁴ Ibid., 81.
A central heuristic in this chapter will be one of Crane’s early works, a sketch called “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers,” published on December 2, 1894, in the *New York Press*. Crane’s journalism was difficult to separate from fiction, part of what Michael Robertson calls the “fact-fiction” discourse that characterizes the journalism of the 1890s, when boundaries between thematic and aesthetic invention and objective reportage were blurred. Michael Schudson argues that the blending of imagination and facticity was simply “the spirit of the times,” a moment in the history of American journalism when editors and reporters held to the belief that invention was a necessary accompaniment to observational and sociological accuracy. Since Crane’s sketch is about the cosmology of groups and events, its mixing of fiction and fact—if there even is a basis in fact for the sketch—allows us to discuss the piece as a literary work. The sketch is a staging of itself, as we will see, but it is also a cosmology and morality play of sorts. That peculiar combination is captured in the title, “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers,” in which sociological axiom is intertwined with biblical history, the sum also figuring the cosmos of the sketch as generated by a little bang. As Crane writes in a much later story, in a sentence itself a reworking of Ecclesiastes, and a devious revision of Wordsworth and Dryden, “The crisis always produces the man.” In turn, biblical history looks merely axiomatic, and social history looks biblical—as small as a little accident, as major as everything.

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A summary of “When Man Falls” is simple enough: a man and a boy, almost certainly immigrants, are walking in Manhattan (we presume it is the Lower East Side) in the late afternoon. The man has a seizure and falls into insensibility. A crowd forms around him, fascinated by the spectacle he presents. While the crowd quickly swells, the panicked boy attends to the man. The crowd watches the man as his affliction continues. A police officer comes and attempts to restore order. Soon an ambulance arrives and takes the man away.

The conditions of the social spectacle conforms to and model the temporal and narrative demands of the genre of the newspaper report and its spectaction. The scenic conditions of the sketch are conspicuously dramaturgical, a spontaneous mystery play. The stage direction of the drama call for “an Eastside street,” the lighting to be provided by the “store windows…a-glare,” lights that are stage-lights and watching eyes; there are makeshift sound effects (“there came the sound of a gong beaten rapidly”). The seething crowd is at once audience and cast, because the public that generates the incident is elsewhere the selfsame consumer of the sketch, at hand then in hand. The man falling is like a protagonist, a mock tragic hero, the boy his stunted Horatio. The policeman is both the comically behind-schedule director (“The first part of the little play had gone on without his insistence”) and a Bowery-Fortinbras who emerges at the end to return states of affairs to order, this after a disappointingly precipitous end, the coming of the “curtain which had been rung down in the midst of this drama,” an “impenetrable fabric suddenly intervening between a suffering creature and their curiosity…” (602, 604). This staging, and the claustrophobic visibility and automatism of it all, also entails a temporal and sequential

dimension. Gerard Genette argues that Proust, who uses the iterative with relentless frequency, in moments that seem incongruous vis-à-vis the technique, is prone to “a sort of intoxication with the iterative.” Crane, we might say, has almost a toxification with the iterative, and these little cosmologies of shame are regular and irregular: regular in their frequency and quality of incident, irregular because they are inherently premised on the evental. This toxic iterative and its lethal pratfalls make up part of the unstable irony of Crane’s work, and each accident generates itself, a scene of stark visibility that is visible to itself and everyone else.

Michael North writes that “it is also possible that modernity itself is governed by a comic rhythm, even when it is not particularly amusing.” North’s comment opens onto that inceptive principle of Crane’s events, and his linguistic economy more generally—an unfunnily funny metaphysics of shame and embarrassment. Crane himself was deeply vulnerable to embarrassment. Paul Sorrentino writes that “[b]eing the center of attention was always a social crisis” for him. His behavior often reflected this, and “in uncomfortable social situations” he “hid emotionally, sometimes literally.” For instance, Crane’s friend John Hilard recalls that Crane was “evidently panic-stricken” at the thought of having a dinner thrown in his honor at the Philistine Club, a popular New York social club. Though Crane sought fame, in an often ostentatious fashion, his seeking coexisted with an acute fear. This fear of public exposure met its

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12 Ibid., 236.

overwhelming occasion in 1896 during what is known as the “Dora Clark incident,” in which Crane, now famous because of the tremendous success of *The Red Badge of Courage*, became notorious for his defense of a prostitute during her trial for solicitation and his sparring with city government over efforts to redress what he perceived to be her mistreatment by police (this included earning the acrimony of a former admirer, the then-New York City Police Commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt). While being cross-examined, Crane, “[o]verwhelmed… covered his face with his hands to prevent the unrelenting barrage of questions from scorching his brain.”\(^{14}\) In the face of public scorn, and a targeting by the police—Crane’s apartment was raided, and police found an opium pipe mounted on a wall plaque as a decoration—Crane left the country: ‘Stephen and Cora’s decision to settle in England in June 1847 was an act not of expatriation but of exile. As one observer noted, Crane had become “the most thoroughly abused man between the Atlantic and the Pacific.”’\(^{15}\) Crane would remain an expatriate for much of the remainder of his short life, and the type of shamed exposure he recoiled from pursued him long after his death—Sorrentino notes that “[e]ven decades after his death, false rumors that he was an opium addict darkened his reputation.”\(^{16}\) That exposure is an effect of Crane’s celebrity, and the feedback loop between scandal and fame, author and public. As a reporter, in an era of celebrity reporters, and as a character in his stories figured through its protagonists, or its victims, the journalistic self-exposure and the fictional representation of exposure are recursive analogues. The fiction of immersion for Crane is always a mediated form of self-exposure, and exposed


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 249.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 207.
characters—like the fallen man—are always Cranean. That is, Crane’s own life is mediated through his fiction, but that fiction also presents a likeness or staging of Crane, just as it presents a staging of itself. The presence of embarrassment is not just a question of identification, but something like a structural principle, as well: take Crane’s notorious grammar, which Willa Cather said “certainly was bad,” but which is often regarded as fundamental to his style and meaning.\footnote{Willa Cather [as Henry Nicklemann], “When I Knew Stephen Crane,” \textit{The Library}, June 23, 1900, in Sorrentino, \textit{Stephen Crane Remembered}, 174.}

The locus of embarrassment in “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers” is of course the fallen man—the figure of the man, or the man in the figure, as we will see—a thing prone, afflicted, changeable. The man’s segregation seems at first to be a stark polarity, a generalized ontological segregation between the fallen thing and everyone else. According to Mary Esteve, the fallen man in the sketch is simultaneously effective and nullifying: nullification is his effect. For Esteve, who is interested in the way Crane’s bodies short-circuit the optical—principally, the photographic—epistemologies of realism, the effective figure is not the man’s face but his body, which precipitates a ‘crowd hypnotically or mimetically immobilized by way of absorbing the corpse-like qualities of the "inanimate thing."’\footnote{Mary Esteve, “A ‘Gorgeous Neutrality’: Stephen Crane's Documentary Anesthetics,” \textit{ELH} 62.3 (Fall 1995): 663-689, 677.} The stricken body can be seen but neither interpreted nor mastered: “Conspicuous as he is, his actions resist legibility; but illegible as he is, the crowd cannot resist him.”\footnote{Ibid., 29.} This anesthetizing incommunicability amounts to a form of social resistance by the intended object of the realist optic. Esteve’s fixing of the body into a body that eludes the will assumes a certain representational fixity of that body and its face, an intactness.
and immobility. Body and face are spatially coherent and isometric visual signs, a photographic
one that resists the mastery of the realist gaze (one that is still life, barely). Michael Fried
describes him as “a disfigured, upturned face with open, unseeing eyes…an object of almost
insane collective will-to-see,” a variant motif of Fried’s general take on Crane as obsessed with
a dangerous absorption in the ontological substrate of writing itself.20 Both accounts here regard
the fallen man as static, as suspended, potent in his effect but stilled in signification, as if subject
to the very immobilizing toxin he disperses, like a venomous animal vulnerable to its own
paralytic.

However, once the story’s various descriptions of the stricken man are carefully
scrutinized, what becomes apparent is that after the fall the pronominal “he” is altogether
tenuous. The sketch stymies a determination of exactly what has fallen and become stricken, in
an apparent exception to the very conventions of its theatrical frame (a two-bit theater of
cruelty), which presuppose visual legibility. First in the story is indeed a “man.” Yet, when he
falls he becomes trebly entrapped: entrapped in the story, entrapped on a crowded stage,
entrapped within his own body. The aesthetic sign substitutes for the sociological, and the man
becomes “the prone figure,” a statue like some grotesque Laocoon realizing movement through
fixity (600). The sketch simultaneously announces its converging of figure as stricken body and
as stricken figure of speech, a “prone figure.” The prone figure is next de-aestheticized, become
empirical and evidentiary, the center of the scene of the crime, “the body” (600). The body
becomes agentially bereft and castrated, “the limp and passive figure,” as the self-reflexive

20 Fried, Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration, 106.
figure of the figure returns, now the exact opposite of the agonized rigor of the statue (601). The limp and passive figure then returns to a masculine identity, a “he” (601). At this point, the theological valence of the title of the sketch is borne out by a theological language that can by no sure means be considered ironic— the eyes of the he are “shining with a mystic light,” while the crowd is “held in a spell of fascination…contemplating a depth in which a human being had sunk and the marvel of the mystery of life and death had them chained” (601). This moment of transcendence and stillness coincides with a startling transformation in descriptions of the man/body/figure. As whatever it is becomes an agent or object of revelation, it becomes something that has passed out of or beyond identification, and beyond any photographic or painterly representationality—now there is “the inanimate thing upon the pave,” an “it”, “a horror” (601). Even the “human bit of wreckage” it is next called establishes a distinction, pushes and pulls between human and wreckage, with the human ultimately qualifying the wreckage that has ontological priority (602). As the story nears its close—as the situation normalizes, the show comes to a close, the report ends—and what began as the man is taken away in an ambulance, a more anthropoid language returns the sketch to where it began, with “the man,” with “He.” Yet there is one final turn, and the sketch concludes with a pathos-laden gesture towards the creatural as such: carried away on the stretcher is “the limp body, from which came little moans and howls,” and, lastly, “a suffering creature” (604). The “suffering creature” is less a gesture of reformist piety and condescension than it is a discordant pieta, a body bereft of identifiers. It ends its figural shiftings as a generalized figure of self-referential exhaustion, the exhausted figuration of the last figure escorting itself out of view.
No totalization of the various changes of the man makes much sense in context—unless the man is simultaneously he, figure, body, seer, it, thing, horror, wreckage, and creature.

Narrative perspective cycles between the crowd (“A slight froth was seen upon his chin”) and an exterior observer (“A man and a boy were trudging slowly along an East-Side street”)—the inside figure and the outside, Crane as bystander and Crane as transcendental perspective (601, 600). Because of this, there is no definitive focalizer to assign these shifts to the impressions of a person or persons, be it the reporter or the crowd. A flux and indeterminacy between the two is generated. If the shifting linguistic figurations of the figure are aspects of a single entity, no identifiable entity seems to have that priority, unless it is the ultimate one of “suffering creature.” Yet this figuration itself merely bleeds back into its constituent and incompatible predecessors.

What is in part a sociological experiment in prose quickly becomes a tropological drama staged within the urban drama. As the thing transitions in and out of states that are revisions, negations, or sublations of preceding figurations, it is characterized through registers of the anthropoid, the plastic arts, the machinic, the holy, the reflexively grammatical, and something stranger and ill-defined, a sort of sourceless organic matter. As each revision requires a subsequent revision, each revision signifies its own fallibility or inadequacy as a signifier that might conclusively name the thing on the ground. By the end of the story, we are unsure of exactly what it is we have had and are left with, although it is discrepantly formal, and radiates shame. For Crane, there is a connection between shame and nonsense: “I reach depths of stupidity of which most people cannot dream. This is usually in the case of a social crisis. A social crisis simply leaves me witless and gibbering.”

The world has trouble naming or figuring this incident, as if a

determinate likeness and name for it is not yet available to the world. This proliferation of incompatible names amounts to an attempt to give a name to something that still lacks a proper name, a thing without a form and with far too much form. Our drama has become a rhetorical one, and can best be explicated through the rhetorical trope of catachresis, which is what I take to be the central rhetorical trope in Crane’s fiction.

The foundational account of catachresis defines it as the trope that disengages a name from its conventional referent, and carries it over to give a name to something that as yet lacks a proper name. In The Poetics, Aristotle does not introduce catachresis as a specific trope, but describes a type of metaphorizing that will later become classified as catachresis: “It may be that some of the terms thus related have no special name of their own, but for all that they will be metaphorically described in just the same way. Thus to cast forth seed-corn is called ‘sowing’; but to cast forth its flame, as said of the sun, has no special name. This nameless act (B), however, stands in just the same relationship to its object, sunlight (A), as sowing (D) to the seed-corn (C). Hence the expression of the poet, ‘sowing around a god created flame’ (D+A).”

In the Institutio oratoria, Quintilian formalizes this figure as catachresis [abusio] and defines it as “catachresis, which we properly call abusio, and which adapts, to whatever has no proper term, the term which is nearest”; for Quintilian, catachresis is distinct from metaphor, because “catachresis is used where a term is wanting, metaphor where another term is in use.”


example of catachresis is “the leg of a chair”—body is to leg as chair is to [here there is a missing term], and so leg, as a literal meaning, is then transported (translated) to fill the missing term.

But there is a second sense of catachresis, proper to aesthetic judgments: catachresis as a metaphor of abusive grotesquerie or extravagance, “a strained, farfetched, or mixed metaphor, with no mention whatsoever of the long-standing distinction on the basis of the presence or absence of an original or proper term.”24 This is an act of rhetorical impropriety, a rhetorical embarrassment. For George Puttenham, echoing this sense of the trope, a catachresis is “neither natural nor proper.”25 While the two general meanings of the trope set out above belong to different domains—one a matter of rhetoric at a technical level and one a matter of juridical criticism—they both share a common basis, the improper as shameful. The fallen man, who becomes an animated metaphor borrowing from an absurd quantity of domains—who has no proper term—is nothing if not “strained, farfetched, or mixed.” His absurdity is similar to the stigma of catachresis in relation to the community of proper tropes, the community of the intact or already-known, and so his social role figures the status of the very trope that is figuring him. A number of critics and philosophers have discussed the temporal dimension of catachresis—it names what does not yet have a name, and so it is the signal trope for the introduction of the new in language and thought. Derrida argues that catachresis must be understood as “the violent, forced, abusive inscription of a sign, the imposition of a sign upon a meaning which did not yet


have its own proper sign in language. So much so, that there is no substitution here, no transport of proper signs, but rather the irruptive extension of a sign.”

Catachresis tries to name what is newly visible and and not readily characterizable. Indeed, the violence of the “abusive inscription” is much like the violence that births the catachresis of the fallen man in “When Man Falls.” The violent newness of this self-exposing world in turn of the century American realism generates the tropes that both figure its violent newness and constitute it. Because catachresis is rhetorically embarrassed, and Crane’s scenes mirror that at other levels, the very trope that names the naming of newness is itself the provisional form of an embarrassed world newly visible to itself and self-generating in that very visibility. The cosmic event of embarrassment is as much a rhetorical event as it is a social one, and in this way the story generates itself, since the aberrant figure is the principle focus in the very scene it generates, and the very linguistic texture of that scene.

For Silvan Tompkins, the physical drama of shame is one of a mutual turning-away, of the person experiencing shame and the person who has provoked the shame—“By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person’s face, and to the other person’s looking at him, particularly at his face.”

Tompkins’ turning away is not just a strategy of mutual self-protection for the sake of saving-face and maintaining propriety. It is also a prophylactic, because “affective contagion occurring through the interocular exchange readily leads to


escalation” (145). To exchange glances is to instantaneously be infected by shame. In contrast to 
Tompkins’ account of the standard move of turning away—or as if in some nightmare version of 
it—Crane’s shamed characters never, and can never, turn away. In instance after instance, in 
Crane’s best-known works, shamed men and women are condemned to look and be looked at. 
Even in death they still face the world—“The corpse of the Swede, alone in the saloon, had its 
eyes fixed upon a dreadful legend that dwelt a-top of the cash machine: ‘This registers the 
amount of your purchase.’” 
28 The fallen man and the crowd each look at each other, too, unable 
to look away. In turn, as the contagion of shame is exchanged between observers, the distinction 
between self and other that shame crystallizes breaks down, and the border between the crowd 
and the fallen man seems to dissolve.

Tompkins writes that “[s]hame is the most reflexive of aspects in that the 
phenomenological distinction between the subject and the object of shame is lost…the self lives 
in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of 
the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its 
visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness” (136). The objectifying of 
which Tompkins speaks, when considered in relation to Crane’s work, where individual 
psychology is thin, and where the distinction between self and others is collapsed, is the 
objectifying of the writing and the rhetoric of the world. It is the highly recursive way in which 
this realism works by seeing itself emerge as both its storyworld (actors, places, events) and its 
linguistic figuration. The shamed world observes itself as objectified, and its rhetorical 
construction is a shamed objectifying. Tompkins writes that “Shame is both an interruption and a

further impediment to communication, which is itself communicated” (137). This relay describes the mechanics of Crane’s world—it begins as an interruption, as the accident—just as it describes how the sketches work, generating themselves, putting themselves on display. Catachreses of social forms are figures for the very newness of themselves as rhetoric and what it is in the world they are attempting to signify. Yet one of the most uncanny aspects of Crane’s work, and one of the keenest divide between Tompkins’ work and its applicability to Crane’s fiction, is the way in which the rhetorical figure in Crane enters back into the world as an uncanny presence and world-maker in its own right, as we will see next.

2.

The observers become almost religiously stunned and enthralled by the fallen man:

“Their eyes however were held in a spell of fascination. They seemed scarcely to breathe. They were contemplating a depth into which a human being had sunk and the marvel of this mystery of life or death held them chained.” 29 Mary Esteve argues that in the sketches Crane “dramatizes the propensity of the underclasses to render themselves conspicuous to the point of invisibility, material to the point of impalpability, verbal to the point of incommunicability: in sum, being human to the point of becoming unhuman.” 30 My reading is of course something of the opposite—this is a sketch of hyper-communication and hyper-visibility, the generation of the world through Tompkins’ “impediment to communication, which is itself communicated.” The audience looks at “his eyes…that in the inanimate thing upon the pavement yet burned


threateningly, dangerously, shining with a mystic light, as a corpse might glare at those live ones who are threatening to trample it underfoot” (601). The fallen man’s burning eyes—Tompkins we recall, writes that “within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes”—enthrall the crowd and provoke an almost ascetic (“scarcely to breathe”) contemplation. Theirs is a moment of collective exegesis of no determinate content, directed toward this uncanny likeness of themselves and the shamed cosmology of their world. The scene becomes a mystery play, something of the replacement of the icon with the iconography of the visible world. The burning eyes are like some burning bush—the stunned, revelatory aura of the fiction’s own self-reflexivity.

But there is something the spectators see they cannot see, because it belongs to the “sunk” man alone. The part of the fallen man that is sunk—unobservable within a scene of complete visibility—figures a speculative location that emerges within the public spectacle as its antinomy. An index of “mystic light” is projected outwards (“shining with a mystic light”) but the inscrutable light indexes a profound introversion (“a depth to which a human being had sunk”). The fallen man has a location within it, a turning-within—but not a psychological interiority—that cannot be observed from the vantage of the social ferment outside it. The shining, like some strange technology, is the figuration of a speculative medium premised in distinction to the writing economy of toxic iteration, exposure, and shame. The light evokes a world altogether outside of exposure, because the figure signals that it alone is the observer of the internal world it is projecting, beyond our observing of that—a blind spot of sorts for the world.
The speculative medium is surely significant because of the clear imprint of visual
technologies like the camera or early cinema, and their entrance into the individual’s sensorium.
But what is most remarkable is that rhetoric itself is the object of this iconographic turning-away
and its public witnessing. And while this might seem to contradict the notion that nothing can
turn away in Crane, this figure of an indeterminate technology is an enunciation (or an
annunciation) of new forms in the rhetoric of realism. Rhetoric, as something visible in the
world, takes on a productive power seemingly independent of what it is referencing. The world
in this turn of the century realism is watching a new language born, and so a new way of seeing
and conceiving of itself—hence, the secular religiosity of the scene. The irony here, perhaps not
unexpected, is how Crane’s work will deploy (and so create) this rhetoric to imagine a world
outside the world, within the world. It is as if the cosmology of the fallen man, the birth of new
figures in the social crucible, likewise births the antinomy of a fiction that deploys itself to
escape its excruciating birthplace. This is then also a scene of the annunciation of weird fictions,
modernisms, surrealisms, and other distortions of the world to come. As Crane once said to his
friend Corwin Knapp Linson: “And I work better at night. I’m all alone in the world. It’s
great!”\textsuperscript{31}

Mark McGurl characterizes the phase of Crane’s work prior to \textit{The Red Badge of
Courage} as his “earlier self-construction as a radical avant-gardiste willing to risk middle-class
social failure in pursuit of higher artistic honor.” Once Crane arrives at \textit{Red Badge}, McGurl
argues, he “[f]igures the social production of an aesthetic discourse of the novel as an emergence

\textsuperscript{31} Quoted in Sorrentino, \textit{Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire}, 118.
from the imprisoning womb of social space.”32 Yet in Crane’s account of the world, exposure and shame are its very a priori. Crane in fact never emerges from that imprisoning womb, because to write is to enter into a recursive system of exposure, and to make the world appear in writing is an act that is an analogue of the shamed world one writes about. What accompanies this exposure is an immediate disenchantment with reflexivity. Some of the most striking moments in these same exposed works are when scenes of exposure provoke the internal imagining of a radically asocial fiction. These imaginings are always experiments with rhetorical tropes, not events in diegesis. A plot of escape or vanishing is not fathomable for Crane. Even the dead are never departed. Following the period in which the New York City sketches were written, Crane’s work will stage sweeping rhetorical effacements of the social world. The paradox (or irony, if you prefer) is that the rhetoric of effacement is the very rhetorical effect of the world it seeks to efface. I will focus here on what might well be Crane’s best-known works, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and “The Open Boat” (1897).

Take the following, one of the most famous moments in all of Crane’s fiction—Henry Fleming’s encounter with a soldier’s corpse in the 1895 Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*.

At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light. Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing. He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that had once been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the

youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle along the upper lip.

The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was for moments turned to stone before it. He remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look. Then the youth cautiously put one hand behind him and brought it against a tree. Leaning upon this he retreated, step by step, with his face still toward the thing. He feared that if he turned his back the body might spring up and stealthily pursue him. (45)

Fleeing in terror from a battle, Fleming runs into the woods and encounters a fallen man. Once again, we see the mutual stare and the contagion of shame: the corpse, embarrassing in its own discomposure, and an embarrassed Fleming. Each is unable to look away from the other. In this instant of mutual exposure, rhetoric is working upon the fallen man to turn him into something else entirely. His body is divided and each division generates a piece of a world that is alien, a paradox of shame producing a rhetorical objectification of a world that is itself outside of shame. Each biotic element constitutes part of another world. The corpse’s back is pressed against an isomorphic “columnlike tree” that makes the spine a trunk and makes a contemplative pose the very stillness of nature. The uniform’s Union blue assumes the green of its surroundings, as nation is natured—like the impersonal green world overtaking the human one. The eyes are the hue of a dead fish as if the human body in death were substitutable with all creatural deaths (the “liquid-looking” eyes also figuring the astonishing prevalence of motifs of the sea, and liquefaction, in Crane more generally). The red mouth is an appalling yellow that draws its repulsive force from the shock of its alterity. As Michael Fried notes, the skin is like parchment upon which is inscribed an inky line of ants, although that very medial metaphor is in the process
of being deformed, not formed.\textsuperscript{33} The dead body becomes a biosphere, a terraformed zone that merges with the scene around it. And so the remainder of the social world, the remnant of shame, becomes absorbed into the serial negation and naturalization of its human characteristics. The dead thing that was initially a writing surface, skin like parchment, reflexively records its own becoming-catachresis, but that catachresis is the face of an unknown medium that effaces the semiotics of the known world—effacing uniforms, facial gestures, paper and its inscriptions. In this respect, the violent, new inscription of catachresis persists in Crane, now creating whole environments without a name.

Fleming is enthralled by this biotic medium that subsumes what it generates, carrying the world past a scene of death and embarrassment and into the material element of that biosphere. Here, Fleming’s hand “brought…against a tree” backwards is the revision of the parchment-skin of the fallen man, as if in the shocked spell of the encounter the impulse is to inscribe, but through a writing that is itself backwards, in two senses: physically backwards, as if without cognition, but also backwards across a vast temporal duration, of epoch or era, as paper reverts to tree, before the object becomes a medium for human inscription. The impulse is not so much to write down, or write at all, as it is to merge spines and to disappear into that era—indistinction, extinction. And here is the dialectic of the scene of social exposure at a higher order—the churning of creation, like the back and forth of the men digging the grave in “The Upturned Face,” inverted into a desire to efface the world. Just after this scene, Fleming rejoins the tatters of his regiment. Stepping outside the world through its writing is impossible, even though the world we cannot escape being within always teases an elsewhere. Except that elsewhere is the

\textsuperscript{33} Fried, \textit{Realism, Writing, Disfiguration}, 137.
world itself—later, as lines of maddened, mangled soldiers run helter-skelter across the battlefield, “[t]he world was fully interested in other matters,” as if it were a thing apart from itself.34

Although it might come as no great surprise, the vehicles of these refigurings of the social world in Crane’s work are often drawn from nature. This referential domain offers objects and settings, like glades, or meadows, or seas, through which a non-mimetic world that negates persons and their social organization can be figured. Crane’s nature is not romantic or antimodern. Rather, it allows rhetoric to trope on referents denoting things outside the human community. One of Lyotard’s descriptions of the inhuman—in essence, the remnants of the sublime as a destabilizing force that might be set against the subject-centered, technocratic world of late modernity—conjures a landscape that overthrows the tyranny of the subject: “…the mind draws itself up when it draws a landscape, but…the landscape has ‘already’ drawn its forces against the mind and that in drawing them up, it has broken and deposed the mind (as one deposes a sovereign), made it vomit itself up towards the nothingness of being-there.”35 Crane imagines the violent exaltation of landscape over the social logic of the world. His is an asocial fantasy, presented through rhetorics of likeness that becomes visible and available for literature at the turn of the century. These rhetorics emerge in a functionally differentiating world, one that is developing different ways of seeing itself, different ways of organizing and placing itself. Crane’s inhuman rhetoric is the symptom of the very world against which Lyotard will later

34 Crane, Red Badge, 47.

position his own inhuman. Yet for Crane that language is the location of the inhuman, imagined as the means of negating its own developing origins. As a part of the world, then, this rhetoric recursively produces that world in the imaginary act of negating it. For Lyotard, writing nearly a century after Crane, the landscape baffles language; for Crane, in the 1890s, the landscape that baffles language is rhetorical. But it is so new, so stunning, as to seem all but alien. Only in time, in later work, will this language ossify into recognizable abstractions with which one might unhappily identify and then theorize. For Crane, it remains annunciatory.

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On January, 2, 1897, the SS Commodore, a steamboat carrying munitions to Cuba upon which Crane was a passenger, sank after colliding with a sandbar. Crane and three other passengers escaped on one of two lifeboats. Their boat spent two days at sea before the men bailed for shore off the Florida coast. Three of the four men survived; the ship’s oiler drowned during the dangerous swim toward shore. The event reinforced Crane’s fame (and so his exposure), and his heroism was recognized in the popular press. Yet his experience on the sea haunted him for the brief remainder of his life. Five days after the sinking, on January 7th, Crane’s journalistic account of it was syndicated. Approximately a month later, he had completed his fictionalization of the incident, the short story “The Open Boat.”

The following passage occurs in the final moments of the story, as the correspondent—the story’s principle focalizer, and a proxy for Crane—is pulled from the surf by a man who notices what is revealed to be the drowned body of the oiler:
He gave a strong pull, and a long drag, and a bully heave at the correspondent’s hand. The correspondent, schooled in the minor formulae, said: “Thanks, old man.” But suddenly the man cried: “What’s that?” He pointed a swift finger. The correspondent said: “Go.”

In the shallows, face downward, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea.

The correspondent did not know all that transpired afterward… (52)

The face of the dead oiler is miraculously downturned and effaced. In a corpus of upturned faces, this an extraordinarily rare moment in Crane. The only response to such a reprieve is the oiler’s posthumous genuflection to the sea. The body, held by the sea, forehead touched by its sands, washed again and again, almost figures an image of beatitude. In between two iterations of the word “correspondent,” the head figures a stylus, composing or corresponding something upon the sand we cannot see, like the face we cannot see. Each flow and ebb of the sea effaces what was written, substituting a fresh writing surface, upon which the corpse rhythmically composes a language we cannot comprehend. This moment of serial effacement is a time-out-of-time: the correspondent’s command to “Go” does not cohere with the implied narrative duration of “between each wave,” which indicates a sequence and passage of time well in excess of the peremptory “Go” and the action that presumably follows. The genuflection and writing of the corpse, which is now absorbed into the matter of the sea, happens in its own time. As if mediating between the correspondent and the time-out-of-time, the narrative perspective hovers indeterminately between a characterological observer and an impersonal narrative presence. The correspondent does not know what “transpired”—that is, our focalizer of the story merges with another correspondent, broadcasting news we cannot make sense of.

Shortly after this, the story ends with the rescued men standing on the shore:
When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea’s voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters. (53)

The scope of this ulterior world is expanded in scale in proportion to the difference between “white waves” upon the sea and lapping waves scaled to the oiler’s head. In a medial shift, the writing of the oiler’s downturned face on the sand is replaced by the “great sea’s voice,” which is “brought” by what suddenly presents as a phonograph of the “wind.” The language of the oiler’s interlineated, non-earthly correspondence is now a filing to be transcribed and broadcast by the great sea, as soundwaves. For Friedrich Kittler, the technological trinity of gramophone, film, and typewriter corresponds to Lacan’s registers of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. As the technological register of the Real, the gramophone records not just what we select as meaningful, but everything, including the incomprehensible: “only the phonograph can record all those noises produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning.”

Because the phonograph captures both signification and noise, sense and nonsense, sense now becomes a material system of differences—here, Kittler’s media-determination of Saussure—and writing is displaced as the sovereign arbiter of meaning. Kittler writes that “Finally, of the real nothing more can be brought to light than what Lacan presupposed—that is, nothing. It forms the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can hold: the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies” (15-16). For Crane’s stories, the cosmology of the world and its content is nothing if not the “physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies.” In the critical history, Crane is most often thought

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of in visual terms, and the medial materialities discussed in relation to him are typewriters, desks, pens, paper, print, photographs, the early cinema. But his fictions about the creation and malfunction of the social world and the self also figure the technology of the phonograph (which Crane surely would have experienced, since by 1897 phonograph parlors were common in major cities like New York City). In a world in writing in which everything is exposed, both reference and figure, everything is necessarily recorded, similar to the phonograph. In Crane, the physiological accidents and stochastic disorders, and rhetorical accidents like catachresis (sense and noise), are precisely what produce meaning—including the paradoxical signification of what is incomprehensible—and so Crane’s world is one where noise and sense are deeply embedded. The recorded world records itself like the phonograph. Subject to Crane’s toxic reiterative, his endless stagings, it repeats itself like a record, as if turning itself into a visual metaphor of the phonograph. The technology of the phonograph by no means overdetermine this aspect of Crane’s work. The very metaphoricity Kittler uses to describe the phonograph emerges as a linguistic and conceptual byproduct of the type of world Crane’s fiction is stunned to discover—a world of accident, of sense and nonsense, of repetitions, of recording and replaying, of games with the reflexivity and materiality of language and other communications technologies.

In Gramophone, Film, and Typewriter, Kittler includes and discusses a short essay by Rilke, “Primal Sound,” written in 1919. In the essay, Rilke writes about his obsession with speculating on what would happen if the needle of a phonograph were to trace the grooves on the top of the human skull:

The coronal suture of the skull (this would first have to be investigated) has—let us assume—a certain similarity to the close wavy line which the needle of a phonograph engraves on the receiving, rotating cylinder of the apparatus.
What if one changed the needle and directed it on the return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound but existed by itself naturally—well, to put it plainly, along the coronal suture, for example. What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music… (40)

Kittler writes in response:

Deprived of its shellac, the duped needle produces sounds that “are not the result of the graphic transposition of a note” but are an absolute transfer, that is, a metaphor. A writer thus celebrates the very opposite of his own medium—the white noise no writer can store. (45)

Rilke’s fantasy reads like a revision of Crane’s seascape—in Crane, the oiler’s head become needle, the body of the sea the cylinder, the wind the speaker, the sea the totality of this apparatus. In “The Open Boat,” the image of technology is bound up with natural imagery, just like the primal inscription in the grove in The Red Badge of Courage. As we saw before, Crane’s world gropes for metaphors to name itself. All images of effacement in “The Open Boat”—a downturned face, an impersonal narrative presence in a time out of time, nature, the gramophone—are elements of this image of the world translated into a sublimely effaced, asocial tongue.

Kittler writes that in Rilke’s fantasy the needle is in fact not reproducing a note, but is producing a metaphor. We can say the same and the opposite about “The Open Boat”—metaphor is producing a needle, insofar as what is so remarkable about the story is the emergence of its own figural capacities to name itself. Phonograph and sea are being used to metaphorize the same thing, and so each is a figure for the other—and what is ultimately produced is this language of the world and how it works, and so the world as such.

Rilke writes the following of the sound that the needle might produce when pressed against the skull: “Incredulity, timidity, fear, awe—which of all feelings here possible prevents
me from suggesting a name for the primal sound which would then make its appearance in the world?…” (41) Crane’s friend Richard Harding Davis, who covered the Spanish American War alongside Crane in Cuba, recalls that Crane once said of war that, “If there is a man who knows aught of that mystic thing he is a man with no tongue.”37 If noise is incomprehensible and unspeakable, the condition of knowing with no tongue—no ability to speak the thing—is akin to naming the primal sound, the mystic thing, which is nonsense, accident, stochastic motion and violence. But we have seen that these accidents are what cause the world to generate itself in Crane. At the end of “The Open Boat,” which is also about the production of metaphor, the men on shore “felt that they could then be interpreters.”38 The story ends with an inversion, the surviving men—including the correspondent—feeling that they can interpret the new and transformed world back to it. In Crane, the more metaphor has to name, and the more metaphor, the less there is that can be known, because the more there is within the world (for example, the language of different function systems—the law, the sciences, the social sciences, and so on, and the new modes of literary rhetoric that borrow from them and vice versa). This condition, then, turns us back to “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers,” in which the act of naming the appearing and incomprehensible world is a central drama. Knowing and unknowing, and the production of what is new and unknown in the linguistic act of trying to name it, becomes a positive feedback loop. One can then feel that one can interpret this world, as the limit of interpretation. And so the story ends prior to any representation of what interpreting might look like.

37 Quoted in Davis, Badge of Courage: The Life of Stephen Crane, 273.

38 Crane, “The Open Boat,” 909.
This is years before Kafka’s famous daydream about telecommunications, which he
described in a letter to Felice Bauer written sometime between January 21-22, 1913. Kafka
recalls that he “ran toward a bridge or some balustrading, seized two telephone receivers that
happened to be lying on the parapet, put them to my ears, and kept asking for nothing but new
from “Pontus” but nothing whatever came out of the telephone except a sad, mighty, wordless
song and roar of the sea.”39 Bernhard Siegert writes the following about the dream:

At the boundary of the senses, the daydream—a dream without sleep,
being awake without being awake—was the dream of the boundary of meaning.
The dream’s path led the dreamer down to the sea, which divided people from
their Other, the realm of the analog media; it led to the place where the letters of
people who had nothing but words became one with the pounding of the surf.40

Kafka writes that in his dream he was “well aware it was impossible for human voices to
penetrate these sounds.” We have seen that in Crane the desire for penetration, for Kafka’s
exegetical, in the face of the agony of visibility and reflexivity turns into a desire to be effaced or
rendered asocial within an Other that drowns out human communication altogether. But,
paradoxically, this Other is the startling creation of an alien world generated through linguistic
figuration. Crane dreams figural language as possessing the same inaccessibility as the noise of
analog media. This escape, which appears in Crane through the same metaphors later used in
metaphorizations of analogue communication, is the paradoxical twin of what is outside writing,
within writing.

However, as we have seen, this very language of noise is the production of the world—
immanently, and as writing within the public eye—and so it is inevitably bound up with a social

39 Quoted in Bernard Siegert, Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System, trans. Kevin Repp
(Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 253.

40 Ibid., 251.
or official basis. In advance, then, Crane’s reaching for a series of supremely sublime metaphors, of ways to fantastically translate the world—glade, sea—also rehearse a failure of later modernist art, from a very different position. What Crane’s work comes upon of its own momentum is what modernism comes upon as it follows through with codification and praxis. Barthes writes that “[t]he final agraphia of Rimbaud or of some Surrealists (who ipso facto fell into oblivion), this poignant self-destruction of Literature, teaches us that for some writers, language, the first and last way out of literary myth, finally restores what it had hoped to avoid, that there is no writing which can be lastingly revolutionary, and that any silence of form can escape imposture only by complete abandonment of communication.”41 In this respect, the beginning of this aim and its inevitable failure appear compressed in Crane’s stories, which play out a future history of art.

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We might approach these questions from a different angle. Crane’s fiction has often been described as uncanny, and that uncanniness seems overt in any number of respects—bodies like automata, corpses that look, landscapes that think (“the music of the wind in the trees is songs of loneliness, hymns of abandonment, and lays of the absence of things congenial and alive”).42 Conspicuous, literal bodies in Crane, these uncanny spectacles have never been hidden. But Crane’s work pulsates with another sort of uncanny, one that resides in and reveals itself at the level of the rhetorical trope. In The Uncanny, Freud briefly addresses the uncanny potentiality of figures of speech. We experience the uncanny, he writes, “when we are faced with the reality of


something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes…” The second clause here characterizes the rhetorical uncanny in Crane, the effect of the splitting off and entrance of the rhetorical trope into the world as a visible thing and referent in its own right.

The symbol entering into the world—figure dividing from referent, and figure becoming referent in its own right, entered back into storyworld and observed by the medium of the story or novel—is not dissimilar from another uncanny effect, that of the double, which Freud simply defines as “the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike” (140). On this account, Crane’s rhetoric, in its uncanny animation of rhetorical tropes, actively generates its own doubles in that fissioning between the figure and its referent. But this is a concretized image of the reflexivity at work in Crane more generally, the way in which it keeps seeing versions of itself, and the way in which those versions keep entering into it to remake it. Because the microcosm in Crane so often figures the macrocosm, as we have seen—a small event that figures the world—a particular uncanny trope and its double recursively figures the world as its own uncanny double, again and again. And this is one of its essential, operative conditions.

For Freud, the uncanny “arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by sense impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been surmounted appear to be once again confirmed” (155). As “the repetition of the same thing,” the uncanny has its origin in “times when the ego had not yet set itself off against the world outside and from others” (143). In Crane, those brief, fantastical disappearances of self into a transforming of world—

terrafformed effacings, watery burials—always seeks to return to some prelinguistic or nonlinguistic origin, like woods or ocean, some place prior to the subject and its language. This at once condenses and reverses Freud’s trajectory. If the uncanny is a little allegory for the disorientations of reflexivity, which is itself the precondition of the conceptualizability of the uncanny, Crane’s backward movement is towards de-differentiation as the registration of what it would look like to be in a world that does not observe itself or copy itself. The shift from the double of Poe, which is a double of the body, to the double of Crane, which is a doubling of rhetoric, is a sign of the encroaching routinization and formalization of reflexivity. Along these lines, in *The Red Badge of Courage* and “The Open Boat” the figuration of glade and ocean is an environment that metaphorizes a world without metaphor. After all, Freud’s “Oceanic feeling” is the feeling of the external ego not separated from the world—the feeling of not being doubled, and so not subject to forms of reflexivity and, for Crane, its agonies of relentless observation. But the surreal, weirdly lyrical landscapes in which these dramas take show that reflexivity is as yet fantastical, stunning, despite the dramas of suffering and death playing out within those landscapes.

3.

Less than two days before Crane’s death on June 5, 1900, when he was insensate in a sanatorium in Badenweiler, in the Black Forest, his wife Cora wrote the following to their friend, Moreton Frewen. The letter was later published:
My husband's brain is never at rest. He lives over everything in dreams & talks aloud constantly. It is too awful to hear him trying to change places in the "open boat"!

Crane becomes a correspondent for his own dream. That dream is the repetition of the remembered trauma of the Commodore, and an allegory of Crane’s death from tuberculosis, which for him was death by a drowning that might be delayed but not avoided. The dream is also an endless rewriting or dictation—of Crane’s journalistic account of the disaster, or his subsequent short story, or the dream itself, formalized as a purgatorial reconfiguration of form in a medium, like places in an open boat. At the end of Crane’s life, his dreams, his biography, his writing, his dying body, and the play of medium and form become difficult to disentangle. A correspondent to the last, he reports this verbally, and his report is transcribed and made public to us in a letter.

Here I take up some of Crane’s later work, fictions where his preoccupation with his own death is everywhere evident, and where linguistic figurations of that death are everywhere on display. Crane’s fictions are written at a moment when the professionalized author is emerging as a distinct category in the American literary system. One mark of the rise of the professional author is the corresponding appearance within fiction of self-reflexive allegories of authorial distinction and, what Mark McGurl playfully calls “autopoetics,” which he defines as “the variable tendency of “involuted” self reference in…aesthetic formations.” Autopoetics is itself one particular form within the literary system of a pressure toward self-production that

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44 Cora Crane to Moreton Frewen, 3 Junae 1900, in The Correspondence of Stephen Crane, Volume 2, 655.

affects everyone, everywhere. Citing Ulrich Bech, McGurl writes that ‘To be subject to reflexive modernity is to feel “a compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging” of a biography and, indeed, for the obsessive “reading” of that biography even as it is being written.’ Yet Crane is unusual to the extent that his regularly embedded biographies are anti-biographies, because his preferred subject, returned to again and again, is his own dying. In this way, he presents a lethal, ironic type of autofiction that preemptively ironizes the type of self-reflexive production of the author’s autobiography that will soon become standard practice for literary fiction. Furthermore, as Crane sees the world come into view of itself, the very rhetorical mode of allegory is made visible and ironized, and autofiction is figured as a visible, bloody mangling of parts. Allegory itself as a general rhetorical mode is also put on mangled, bloody display as the rhetorical mode par excellence for a world in which everything is exposed to itself.

Crane’s life was marked by death—by the time he was nineteen, his father, mother, a brother, and his only sister had all died (from illness, and, in the case of his brother Wilbur, an accidental drug overdose). His most recent biographers surmise that Crane was well-aware of the brief life allotted to him. According to Paul Sorrentino, Crane realized “from childhood that he would most likely not live long.” Lydia Davis claims that “if examined closely, the record suggests that Stephen had in fact had tuberculosis since childhood and that he knew it, had always known it.” Willa Cather, who met Crane only once, in 1895 at the offices of the

46 Ibid., 12.
47 Sorrentino, Life of Fire, 262.
48 Davis, Badge of Courage, 62.
Nebraska State Journal in Lincoln, wrote just after his death that “Now that he is dead it occurs to me that all his life was a preparation for a sudden departure.” She recalls telling him that “in ten years he would probably laugh at all his temporary discomfort.” His response was “I can’t wait ten years, I haven’t time.”49 He died three years shy of that decade.

In 1897, Crane wrote from England to his brother William Crane, “There seem to be so many of them in America who want to kill, bury and forget me purely out of unkindness and envy—my unworthiness, if you choose.”50 One of the forms taken by Crane’s awareness of his death, and his relentless concern with its public representation, is the motif of an exposed burial—a body that is disabled, paralyzed, shackled, but never covered up. With this in mind, I want to take up Crane’s last story, “Manacled,” first published a year after his death in 1901. It is a brief story about a man who is playing a hero in a romantic play (the man is referred to only as the “hero” or as “he” throughout the story) when a fire breaks out in the theater. The story begins with the familiar turn of the century realist fascination with representing people watching a medium that is representing a simulation (“In the first act there had been a farm scene…The audience had been consumed with admiration of this play”).51 But then that medium is ruptured and a new drama takes shape (“Suddenly a policeman came running frantically along the street”) (1291). During the audience’s and actors’ mad rush to escape the theater, the hero, wrists and ankles shackled moments before as part of the play, is abandoned. Alone and immobilized, he watches the fire spread and bitterly awaits his death: ‘He lay there whispering. “They all got out

50 Sorrentino, Life of Fire, 262.
but I. All but I” (1293). The story begins with literal role-playing, but then this role-playing is inverted into a rendering of suffering and death—and whatever type of role that might or might not entail—that is singular in Crane’s work,

Here is the end of the story:

Suddenly the hero beat his handcuffs against the wall, cursing them in a loud wail. Blood started from under his fingernails. Soon he began to bite hot steel, and blood fell from his blistered mouth. He raved like a wolf. Peace came to him again. There were charming effects amid the flames… He felt very cool, delightfully cool…

“They’ve left me chained up.” (1293)

The change of programming, from one drama to another, is another one of Crane’s cosmologies, here a literary-historical one: the staging of the staging of his fiction, the exit of an earlier romance or genteel realism and the entrance of his particularly lethal brand of realism and the world that it belongs to. As the fire breaks out—the inceptive accident—we are left with a realism where suffering, spectacle, and drama are indistinguishable. The doomed, isolated hero becomes a real performer for the reader as spectator alone. As such, no moment in Crane is more conspicuously intimate than this one. The formal closure of Crane’s fiction, its self-enclosed and model-like shape, is split open and extroverted, and he offers a one-man show as theater of cruelty. When we consider the moment of the story’s writing—Crane’s last story—and the manner of his death—the bodily entrapment that is tuberculosis, the fistulas and hemorrhages that agonized him, his spitting of blood (“blood fell from his blistered mouth”)—we realize that we are also attending a dying author’s imagining of his deathbed and his public burial. It is an imagining as lonely as dying and as public as a readership—a readership now public in its own privaey, as the same intimacy is staged for everyone who reads the story.
The death and burial here is startlingly immediate and literalized in relation to similar scenes in Crane’s work. The closing paragraph cited above is surely his most visceral moment of damage to a body. Pain and injury are shorn of the lunar distance with which they are so often observed by his narrators; there is just too much finality here, too much focus on the wounds as immediate and as felt (in contrast to wound as a red badge or a wound as a figure of effacement). As the hero struggles to break his shackles, and to angrily punish those objects and himself—hitting metal, hitting a wall—blood begins to come from wounds on his fingers. And as he gnaws on his handcuffs, blood falls from his burnt and lacerated mouth. What comes up against intransigent, wounding matter is not just the hero’s body, but all modes of communication—to signal (to beat the walls), to write (fingers and fingernails), and to speak (the mouth). And in turn what comes out is blood, a bodily counterpart to the shit that comes into and out of the world in “The Upturned Face,” and a particularly grim vision of the materialities of communication. The moment when a reprieve arrives, which might otherwise remind us of the scenes of world-transformation and disappearance discussed in the previous section—“Peace came to him again. There were charming effects amid the flames…”—is fragmentary, abridged, almost dutiful and perfunctory. No speculative world emerges here. Instead, the very quotation marks in the concluding line—“They’ve left me chained up”—manacle direct speech about being manacled, enclosing the utterance into handcuff-loops of isolated recursion, a visual pun on display. Character is chained to setting, Crane’s body is chained to its disease, the audience is chained to the spectacle, grammar is chained to figure and reference. And these referential levels are cross-referential and so chained to one another. The violent making of a public is chained to the narrative form recursive with its operation, and everyone and everything—including the one who
is about to die in a fire, and who is writing and acting out that public autogenesis—watches its enchainment.

The motif of spilling blood as the materiality of communication is fundamental to much of Crane’s late fiction. Take the following examples from some of his last stories: “There was no disobeying the man. Lying there with a little red hole in his left lung, he dominated him through his helplessness and through the fear that if they angered him he would move and—bleed”; “A bullet struck Morton and he fell upon the man who had been shot in the throat”; “Big Watson laughed, and, speeding up his six-shooter like a flash of blue light, he shot Placer through the throat…Placer fell behind the counter, and down upon him came his ledger and his inkstand, so that one could not have told blood from ink.”; “Meantime the serjeant was re-loading the rifle. His foot slipped in the blood of the man who had been shot in the throat and the military boot made a greasy red streak on the floor.” Here, to write in a scene (“a greasy red streak on the floor”) and to effect the writing of the scene (“he fell upon the man who had been shot in the throat”) presupposes the centralization of spilled blood, as if it were the ink of the late fiction, which leaks the very blood that animates it. Wounds to the mouth, throat, or lungs—scenes of the stochastic, of the accident—produce a medium and either write with it directly or recursively turn the ends of actions into their own writing in blood. The circulation of that blood, as if coursing through a vascular system, is the precondition of channels of communication and a literal image of what is so often communicated in Crane. Crane’s work keeps stressing the identicality of a network of shackles and a network of capillaries, of arteries and syntax, blood and plot—a bio-syntactic version of self-making and self-unmaking.

52 Crane, “God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen,”; “And If He Wills, We Must Die,”; “Twelve O’Clock,”; “And If He Wills, We Must Die,” Prose and Poetry, (1073, 1282, 835, 1281).
The image is of a little world that punctures itself and writes itself in its own blood. This bloody reflexivity covers in red its making of itself as a drama, as a grammatical artifact, as an autofiction, just as it covers the public that the fiction figures as its audience. That Crane’s own body and death is at the center of this means that we are seeing a sort of portrait of the artist as a dying young man, but a splayed-out and gutted version, like a Thomas Eakins painting of a patient on the operating table, on display. It is a painting of the world as Crane’s autopsy. In this way, the author image constantly bleeds and blurs into event and static structure, action and portrait, private and public.

Nancy Bentley identifies the “distinction model” as one of the dominant paradigms of recent discussions of American literary realism, and cites as examples work by Mark McGurl, Phillip Barrish, and Thomas Strachyz. In both *The Novel Art* and *The Program Era*, those allegories of authorial self-making touched on above—McGurl’s autopoetics—are one of the marks of the professionalization and institutionalization of American literature. In his earlier *The Novel Art*, which focuses on turn of the century realism, McGurl announces that he will read for “the way—whether by direct statement, or suggestion, or the waking dreamwork of allegory—the art-novel can be made to tell the story of its own emergence as a recognizable generic form.” His readings then track the author’s pursuit of distinction as a matter of a strategic positioning of authorial style and subject matter in relation to a public readership. These can be a diffuse range of techniques, not necessarily an embedded narrative of authorial ascendance. In

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his subsequent *The Program Era*, which concerns fiction after the Second World War, McGurl’s account of the plot of these allegories of authorial self-making becomes much more streamlined and narrative-driven. He writes the following of his account of Flannery O’Connor: “This way of reading O’Connor rather flagrantly puts her person back into her “impersonal” narration. Not only must we rely on our knowledge of the author’s biography in doing so, but we more or less dismiss the relevance of a potential distinction between O’Connor as author and her impersonal narrators, merely insisting that we see that narrator as only a partial manifestation of a larger autopoietic process that also involves the construction of her characters.”

The autopoetic allegories of *The Program Era* quite often look like allegories that follow the realist narrative paradigm of the American corporate romance or success story; the author replaces the immigrant, the provincial, the urchin, and cultural institutions or institutions of higher learning replaces private enterprise. As much as the shift between the two books—from more diffuse accounts of techniques of distinction to the linearly emplotted allegories of autopoetics—is a matter of McGurl’s reading practice, the increasing centralization of the institution (specifically, the university) plays a significant role in consolidating autopoetic emplottment. But the indication of the self, and the crafting and display of the self, is the long strategy of staking one’s claim to literary prestige, stretching across the turn of the century rise of literary fiction through the Program Era.

Crane is notable because he at once instances and lethally ironizes his own autopoetics, as well as a critical reading for autopoetics, which is itself something of an ironic hermeneutic. Accidental visibility is the inceptive event of Crane’s world—his micro-cosmology of a reflexive

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world stunned by its reflexivity, recursively summoned into being by little bangs of accident and violence. As we have seen in the cosmology and eschatology that is “Manacled,” in Crane’s work the making of the exposed world and the autopoesis of the author image are cognate, just as a portrait of the fiction is a portrait of the autopsied body. In Crane, because everything figures itself and is exposed, as we have seen—a self-reflexivity of emplotment, grammar, linguistic trope, author—what is always exposed is the very inception of the self-reflexive allegory. In that respect, the display of allegory is always on display, and the fiction is fascinated with that display—the biography McGurl sees sees itself—as if it were gutted, splayed out, and put on view.
Crane’s is a sort of stunned amusement and horror at the exposure of the rhetoric of fiction, and the link between that rhetoric and self-identity, and in turn the very allegorizing readings that will become more narratively intricate as the practice of autopoetics within fiction becomes codified. Autopoiesis, then, is itself allegorized in visible burial stories, such that it has arrived at its own allegory before a critic has exhumed it. The last story of many stories of Crane’s death, “Manacled,” is the closest thing to the standard allegory of autopoeisis—the emerging of a self-stipulated identity, the actual autonomy of the hero. But the very social conditions of autopoeisis and its rhetorical mode are ironized as a sort of hell, a fiery and very public stage with no exit, where one can only bleed and burn. This is why Crane allegorizes his unmaking to the same extent that he allegorizes his making, because they are one and the same. Autopoetics for him is auto-da-fé. The forward-trajectory of the autopoetic narrative in Crane, which in other authors often looks like a little künstlerroman or success story, is simultaneously confirmed and reversed, as self-making becomes self-burial, and as allegory turns in on itself to expunge itself. The play of the open boat in Crane’s dream—that rotation of positions, publicity, repetition, report—
returns as the trapped space in which the author circulates, replayed again and again like the phonograph, a joke told again and again. The punchline of “Manacled”—“they’ve left me chained up”—is sibling to the punchline of that other late burial story, 1899’s “The Upturned Face,” with its gross and all-encompassing “plop!” The rhetorical structure of the punchline (which is its own violent pun) in relation to these stories—the most parabastic of all Crane’s work, the dying self as the dying self’s own chorus—trumps even the final determination of autopoetics. The punchline retroactively warps the entire rhetorical structure of the stories and subordinates them to itself. If the punchline is one final grab at distinction, that distinction does not seem to be on behalf of the dying Crane, but on behalf of something grimmer, which emerges as an inhuman, impersonal, and unfunnily funny summarization of identity, the public, reading, criticism, and its ends.

4.

The narrator is essential for Mark McGurl’s autopoetics, because sociological and institutional readings are derivable from it. In this last section, I want to take a somewhat different view of narration in Crane. Rather than thinking through it biographically and autobiographically, as in the preceding discussion, I want to take up the mimesis of perception and consciousness in Crane’s narratorial figures. This will allow us to explore one of the ultimate horizons of Crane’s uncanny registration of reflexivity and the relationship of his work to modernist art and literary modernism.

The following sentences begin Crane’s short story, “The Blue Hotel,” first published in 1898:
The Palace Hotel at Fort Romper was painted a light blue, a shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron, causing the bird to declare its position against any background. The Palace Hotel, then, was always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a gray swampish hush. It stood alone on the prairie, and when the snow was falling the town two hundred yards away was not visible. But when the traveller alighted at the railway station he was obliged to pass the Palace Hotel before he could come upon the company of low clapboard houses which composed Fort Romper, and it was not to be thought that any traveller could pass the Palace Hotel without looking at it.

(799)

In its rhetorical noisiness, the first two sentences do what they describe the Palace Hotel as doing—they declare themselves. They are a rhetorical “screaming and howling” that describe a scene of total silence and invisibility. We begin with the blue color of the Palace Hotel likened to the color of a heron, which seems literal enough. The heron then becomes caught up in an opaque metaphor for the effect of its blue color upon both it and its analogue of the hotel: its color causes “the bird to declare its position.” In the next sentence, a conclusion without any preceding steps—“The Palace Hotel, then”—ratifies a necessary relationship between “to declare” and its sonic intensification into gibberish, “screaming and howling.” This is followed by a simile (“seem only a gray swampish hush”) within which is couched another metaphor (the “hush”), and this doubled figure works to make double the scenic quality of a landscape, as both swamp and prairie. We can of course infer that the sentences signify something like “the blue hotel is ostentatious and the most conspicuous object in its vicinity,” but that hardly seems to be what the sentence is really communicating. The sentences declare themselves, declare their semantic and syntactic garishness—their shamed exposure, their catachreses—and become something of a reflexive material metaphor for the hotel they describe, their syntax approximating the spatial appearance of the building. Yet the blue hotel and the sentence, in all their conspicuousness, are
seen by no character until mention is made of travelers arriving by train in the fourth sentence. In effect, the third sentence, about a gap of visibility between hotel and town, spatially enforces that division. Without people, these sentences still hum with a glaring visibility—syntax and rhetoric assert themselves into the field of narratorial perception. The point, it seems, is just how much noise and animation there is, to see and hear, everywhere, even when no people are nearby.

The narrator here seems to be no less inscrutable than the sentences through which that narrator is recursively generated. Who observes the hotel? Who is this strange third person? The sentence and the hotel, each a metaphor for the other, perceptible when no person is looking, perceptible at the syntactic and the representational level, are some uncanny mirror image of our inhuman narrator, in an exposed or alien world that perceives itself.

The coherence of the third person narrator in classic realism depends upon the convention of conceiving of the narrator as an intending psychology, or a human optic (a point of view), often with the occasional interruption of the first person to remind us of an ethical design, as in James. Indeed, such an assumption is already encoded in the very name “the third person.” Correlating epistemological concerns like the reliability of observation and interpretation with ethical concerns, most of us still implicitly posit a human intentionality by which we might speak of and understand the narrator. This seems to be the way realism itself would have it, too, in part because of a social interest that entails the staging of plots that might at once construct and investigate the social—“that moral purpose” to which James refers in “The Art of Fiction.” I want to touch here on Paul de Man’s essay “Hypogram and Inscription,” which is focused principally on poetry. First, we should note that in the essay de Man questions the distinction
between prosopopeia and catachresis, by arguing that every prosopopeia is itself a catachresis
and vice versa “…prosopon-poiein means to give a face and therefore implies that the original
face can be missing or nonexistent. The trope which coins a name for a still unnamed entity,
which gives face to the faceless is, of course, catachresis…But it is possible that, instead of
prosopopeia being a subspecies of the generic type catachresis (or the reverse), the relationship
between them is more disruptive than that between genus and species.”

De Man will use prosopopeia as his guiding trope, but, since that trope is so bound up with catachresis—the trope
of newness, and the trope of embarrassment, and so the trope par excellence in Crane—for our
purposes we can regard prosopopeia and catachresis as likenesses. In any event, de Man claims
that “prosopopeia…as the trope of address, is the very figure of the reader reading…” and
likewise “the master trope of poetic discourse” (45, 48). De Man, for whom only the materiality
of the signifier ensures the semblance of a referent, writes that “If there is to be consciousness (or
experience, mind, subject, or face) it has to be subject to phenomenalization. Since the
phenomenality of experience cannot be established a priori, it can only occur by a process of
signification” (48). De Man takes up Hugo’s poem “Ecrit sur la vitre d’une fenetre flamande,”
and argues that because the poem “sets up a rapport between concepts said to be structured like a
sense perception,” the poem—like all poems—relies on prosopopeia to give a face to the rapport
between concepts (47). Prosopopeia then gives a face in the poem to the consciousness that can
only now be said to intend these concepts. Hugo’s mimesis of sense perception, the face of a
narrator, relies on indexical, serialized concepts to give it duration in time, akin to how the
perceptibility of time depends on the strikes of a clock. In this respect, the process of the mimesis

56 Paul deMan, “Hypogram and Inscription,” *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of
of consciousness in the poem mirrors the process of consciousness in the reader. The reader reading gives face to both itself and the poem in the act of reading.

In Crane, the narrator is not a lyric narrator and does not purport “to make the invisible visible,” as De Man says of the claim poetry makes. But what de Man says of poetry applies equally to prose. De Man writes that “since mimesis is itself a figure, it is the figure of a figure (the prosopopeia of a prosopopeia)” (48). In Crane, the mimesis of narratorial consciousness really is the mimesis of a perception of linguistic figures—the figure of a figure of a figure. The narrator actually sees linguistic figures in the storyworld, not just rhetorical tropes masquerading as realist reference and waiting to be revealed as such by the literary critic. Narratorial percepts in Crane often consist of mimetic objects (seeing the literal fallen body), metaphor as if materialized in the world (seeing the terraforming corpse), and syntax and grammar materialized (seeing the figure of speech in “The Blue Hotel”). This is a world that now sees itself appear, as we have seen again and again—for example, in its of exposure of actors and grammar, the materiality of media emerged into the world (like the gramophone), the portrait of the author as dissected and splayed out across narrative structure. The general practice of discerning the detachment of figure from referent has been available to us as critics for some time, in the idiom of deconstruction, with its cybernetic underpinnings. Once the critical idiom of deconstruction becomes available, the effects it discerns become visible across a broad literary-historical sweep. What in deconstruction becomes visible as a critical maneuver is visible as the thematic concerns and rhetorical effects of Crane’s writing, as something with which they are graphically fascinated. His world also builds itself through these relays of figure splitting off from reference

in various iterations, these uncanny figures entering back into the world as actants, to animate a world exposed, animated, ironized, and lethal. What distinguishes Crane’s historical particularity is his making visible in fiction the expansion of the social and medial technics of reflexive modernity—the public, the mass media, materialities of communication, a relentless self-reflexivity on the part of the individual.

The mimesis of consciousness in Crane is already the mimesis of an exposed loop between reference and figure, and between broader rhetorical units entering into similar loops, as well (as in “The Blue Hotel,” where the sentence becomes an object in its own right). These are all communications of catachreses, in its various but cognate uses in Crane—failures, extravagant metaphors of failed social acts, new and monstrous things without a name, and, now we see, the mimesis of perception and consciousness itself. The face that perceives this world of grammar and signs is an alien one in the context of a mimetic realism. Since the mimesis of consciousness in Crane depends on the visual perception of linguistic figures, and grammar itself, it too becomes equally exposed as a catachresis at an order more graphic than the process de Man implicitly ascribes to all narrators. Narration in Crane loops around to see itself figured everywhere in his uncanny world—it keeps staring at its own face turned back to face it, as exposed as anything else. The drama of shame is played out at the level of the mimesis of consciousness, and Crane’s narrators are as immured in his world as his shamed figures. They are either far from the personological with which they are often identified—the reporter, the traveler, the scientist of naturalism—or they simply make all persons and what their consciousness might look like seem wholly alien.
And the inhuman contents of this world, these rhetorical figures given substance, are
themselves figures that seem conscious, like that gaudy blue heron of grammar in “The Blue
Hotel,” or the cash register that stares right back at the staring corpse of the Swede. John
Berryman had discerned this when he wrote (somewhat hyperbolically) of Crane that “his
animism is like nothing else in civilized literature.” Even figures of speech like “to lose face”
become speech figures—corporeal embodiments of rhetoric—as Martin Zirulnik has pointed out
in a recent article on Crane’s “The Monster.” Crane’s linguistic figures are often ascribed
human characteristics—they move, they have agency, they behave like representations of
humans do. They come to be what they symbolize, which is Crane’s version of the Freudian
uncanny. Moreover, they can interpret and refigure the world, like phonographs or terraforming
fallen men. Consciousness is almost equally diffused in the world, as if sifted by some
Maxwell’s Demon, as if narrator and figure in the world were each a positional rotation of the
other, as if the shifting levels of reference of Crane’s narrator were simply the world registering
itself. This is why, as in “The Blue Hotel,” we can lose the distinction between world and
narrator altogether, and an empty world—with no personological observer—begins to narrate
itself, as its own observer. We might think of Crane here in relation to James. Sharon Cameron
sees consciousness in James as something that occurs not within but between characters. But
what occurs within the world in Crane is both like and radically unlike the dialogic, ethically
charged, elaborate “between” of consciousness in James. It is the visible diffusion of

58 Berryman, Stephen Crane, 268.
59 See Martin Zirulnik, “Crane’s Speech Figures and the Making of Whilomville’s Monster,” Novel 48,
no. 3 (November 2018), 400-420.
consciousness through and across everything, and a constant uncertainty as to the distinctions 
between face and world, representation and figure, human life and forms of life.

Consider, then, Michael North’s discussion of Picasso’s 1906 portrait of Gertrude Stein, a 
seminal moment of modernist art:

…the mask that Picasso gives first to Stein is both ancient and impersonal while somehow also being a perfectly individual likeness…What the portrait most faithfully represents is the tension, the slippage, between mask and face, between impersonality and individuality, conventional representation and likeness, which it was Stein’s program to explore. Picasso’s mask presents this program by only indirectly representing Stein’s face.60

Picasso paints Stein’s portrait six years after Crane’s death, and fifteen years after “When Man Falls, A Crowd Gathers” was first published. In Crane’s work, the relationship between narrator and world, and world and its visible abstraction, evokes slippages between face and mask, individuality and impersonality. In Crane—and, in far more codified and deliberate fashion, the modernisms to come—this ambiguity of distinction become a fascination in its own right, and an earlier counterpart in the domain of aesthetic production to what will later appear as a concern of deconstruction. In Crane, the slippages might seem to be solely a question of rhetoric—and yet Crane’s work has often inspired comparisons to painting. Conrad, for example, famously said that Crane was “the only impressionist, and only an impressionist,” and Michael Fried positioned Thomas Eakins and Crane side-by-side. The painterly comparisons have generally been to realism and impressionism—the purportedly objective rendering of the world, or the mimesis of the senses’ subjective perception of it. For example, Katherine Biers says of Crane that “…his impressionistic style, so redolent of film and photography, along with his fascination with the

mediated nature of perception along with the shocks administered by war, have made him, for many, a herald of the international modernist movement in literature and the arts that arose during and after World War I,” while Nancy Bentley says that “Crane’s texts are less like the absorbing canvas of an impressionistic painting and far closer to the movement of disjunctive images that would characterize early cinema.”61 But the self-exposing condition in Crane doubles the world, recursively making its linguistic construction visible—and this is akin to the compositional logic of Picasso’s portrait of Stein. Crane, in a sense, does an early version of what cubism does, by entering the reflexive abstraction of realist representation back into it. Except since Crane is narrative, these re-entries act as things in the world in their own right—hence the uncanniness of his narratives. In Crane, what is mask and what is face is perhaps even less determinable than what North draws attention to in Picasso’s portrait—each is at once mask and face, narrator and world, and the world is its own mask and face (perhaps another reason why Crane is so fascinated with the image of the upturned face). As in cubism, the world is a superimposition or graphic feedback loop between objects and their abstraction (into mask, or linguistic figure, or geometric translation). What holds true for painting also extends to Crane and his relationship to American literary modernism. North points out that Stein’s experiments with dialect work not unlike Picasso’s portrait—“Dialect is most like “a verbal mask” when it plays against such correctness because then it approximates the mask’s uncanny power to focus the natural and the arbitrary in a single spot.”62 Crane’s prose works this way, as well, in all its weirdness, and his divisions of world and storyworld, abstraction and person, figure and

61 Katherine Biers, Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 35; Bentley, Frantic Panoramas, 296.

62 North, Dialect, 72
reference, can be transposed at the verbal register to the distinction between dialect and
prescriptive language in literary modernism.

That weird distribution of consciousness across narrator and world looks something like a
precursor to what will become the narrative technique of stream of consciousness, as well. It is as
if there is a lag between the reconfiguration of mind in Crane’s fiction and its eventual migration
into a technical narrative practice. Certainly consciousness in Crane is never concentrated in a
singularity—never Lambert Strether or Maggie Verver, to say nothing of a Daedalus or a
Compson—nor does style metaphorize consciousness, as in the relentless, constricted syntactical
variations of a Melanctha. Yet consciousness externalized into the world is itself a preliminary
technical catachresis of what will eventually be named, refined, formalized, and codified as a
modernist narratological technique. In Crane, it is not the directed course of a stream, but the
limitless, unruly expanse of an ocean, a total exposure. That this emerges so uncannily in his
world, without the programmatic self-awareness of modernism, speaks to Crane as a sort of
explorer of alien territory, and a test-subject for new, sometimes agonizing effects of reflexive
modernity, which his own entrancement, and strange brilliance, allowed him to render in his
fiction. Its later harnessing as an intending narratorial subject is to bring to order Crane’s
wandering into alien territory, with all its rapt fascinations and agonies. Crane’s world seems at
once unprepared for what it discovers, astonished by it, and astonishingly receptive to it.

5.

What the night was to Whitman, the sea was to Crane, although it brought him much less
comfort. His close friend Joseph Conrad recalls his final visit to Crane, at a seaside hotel in
Dover on May 23, 1900, Crane’s last day in England before his departure to Germany, where he died on June 5 at the age of 29.

The last words he breathed out to me were: “I am tired. Give my love to your wife.” When I stopped at the door for another look I saw that he had turned his head on the pillow and was staring wistfully out of the window at the sails of a cutter yacht that glided slowly across the frame, like a dim shadow against the grey sky.63

Early in his career, Crane observed Howells looking at a window; at the end of his life, Conrad observes Crane looking out a window at the sea. As Conrad perceives it, Crane is looking at his double and its ghost, a cutter yacht like a dim shadow. Conrad sees, or imagines, his friend slipping away through two successive degrees of figuration, graceful body and departing spirit, each easeful of motion and absent of pain. Crane, the fallen man, is now written by Conrad. Crane’s and Conrad’s writing often concerned suffering, and we can easily imagine the rope that was used to torture Nostromo’s Hirsch, and which Decoud later hallucinated as stretched across the bleak horizon end to end, binding the wrists of one of Crane’s fallen men. But here Conrad offers a lovely, last revision of Crane’s stories of shamed exposures and burial. In figuring this reprieve, Conrad sees his own abstractions, and so by seeing Crane seeing his graceful doubles, Conrad sees his own face doubled. The making and merging of self and other glides like a shadow between the two men.

Conrad once wrote to Crane “I write you as though we had been born together before the beginning of things.”64 There is an equally astonishing sentence in “The Open Boat,” written

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before Crane and Conrad had met, which reads like Crane’s imagining of Conrad’s imagining:

“These two lights were the furniture of the world.” 65 In this early, empty world, there is a singular intimacy, with no faces to be shamed, no bodies that can suffer, and nothing to be seen but the element of sight.

In our late world, Conrad would keep a framed portrait photograph of Crane on the furniture that was his writing desk, for the remainder of his life. Crane would be always “against the frame” without gliding beyond it. Instead of a face looking at a face that is looking onto the sea, or two lights together with nothing to see, Conrad and the photo of Crane always look back at one another, as Conrad writes.

Chapter Two

The Life and Death of Worlds in Dunnet Landing, Maine, 1896

In this chapter I take up Sarah Orne Jewett’s 1896 novel The Country of the Pointed Firs. The novel is the best-known example of local color, a subgenre of American literary realism which concerns autonomous rural communities on the cusp of disappearance. I want to continue my account of the rhetorical and narrative effects of turn of the century realisms that begin to see figurations of themselves and themselves as figurations. The scene of this chapter does not involve the immanent, violent confrontations within a shamed world that we saw Crane. It is not an uncanny sociology. Rather, we will encounter a broader, almost cosmically-expansive observational scale of the life and death of selves, communities, novels, genres, and systems. Firs is one of the vastest novels in American literary history, and one of the most uncannily speculative. It remains a missing link in discussions of the formal trajectory of American literature, and it offers an example of the stunning effects of reflexivity upon the rhetoric and form of turn of the century realisms.

The Country of the Pointed Firs, which is set in a small, dying town in coastal Maine, is a very short novel that is concerned with the life and death of worlds. As a consequence of that, it is concerned with its own fate as a medial object in historical time. The novel, often regarded by critics and readers as small in scale, builds itself from itself and generates a vastness as it does so. The central principle of its autopoeisis is the internal differentiation of its form—its production of more and more levels of cross-reference and self-reference, an increasingly
complex figural system that becomes so complex that mimesis itself cedes priority to it. As Firs continues to differentiate itself, the novel extends its own historical and generic boundaries, entering its outsides into itself. It becomes its own visitor. The paradox is that this vast expanse, in which local color becomes increasingly ulterior, is its world. Because it can see the principles of its construction, it can see its contingency and finitude. And as it observes its antinomies, it plays out the dismantling of the generic and readerly predicates of that realism.

The chapter is a description or transcription of a novelistic world-making and unmaking. The Country of the Pointed Firs, a novel that becomes its own visitor, demands that we become the visitor of that—observing things, taking notes, and then trying to report back to the community we came from.

1.

Firs is at once the exemplar of the local genre and a staging of that genre’s vanishing, a paradox that is central to this chapter. To begin, I want to set out some of the parameters of local color. Its roots trace back to the antebellum period—a writer such as Stowe, for instance—but as a codified genre rather than a tendency local color emerged and thrived in the 1880s and early 1890s. The genre is generally understood as a female one—female in authorship, female in sensibility (so the critical history often holds, that is)—devoted to rendering the appearance and customs of rural communities on the cusp of historical disappearance. Because of its concern with degeneration and decline, it is often linked to the wider category of literary naturalism. June Howard characterizes the genre in the following terms—“Local color is generally understood to designate fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that strives to represent the
landscape, dialect, and folkways of some specific region of the United States.” Jewett herself wrote that her writerly purpose was “keeping some of the names and places alive in memory… soon to be forgotten.” In her case, these were the names and places of rural Maine. The style of the genre is a sort of nurturing realism—appreciative descriptions of landscape, custom, and character, and a wistful, sometimes amused, but always gentle tone, tinged with hues of the sentimental tradition. The premise of story, and its structural corollary, generally presupposes an observer from the metropole who travels to a rural community. That observer then reports back to the metropole as an implicit condition of its address. The genre is centered in “the trope…of the visitor who frames, interprets, and/or invades the scene, as in Jewett’s narrators…” Richard Brodhead has pointed to an essential division between the narrator as a proxy of the metropole and the literary establishment, and the observed as the community outside of but always refracting the self-consciousness of modernity: “Part of the imaginative labor [of Firs] is to produce coastal Maine as antithesis of 1890s urban modernity.” This bivalent logic establishes a differential perspective, a sort of double-consciousness of intimacy and distance, of participation and notation. Such doubleness encodes the ideological dimension of the genre. As Donna Campbell writes, “Local color fiction finds strength in looking to the past for its values, seeing in the dying economies and vanishing folk ways of its pictured regions an America that never

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Local color is almost always a report of itself, the observation, notation, and report of a little world invented for the purpose of its observation, notation, and report.

A brief account of the novel is in order here, although I will not turn to a close analysis of the novel for several pages. It will, however, be helpful to go forward with a general sense of its contours. The novel begins with our unnamed narrator returning to the small—and dying coastal town of Dunnet Landing, Maine, some months after a first, brief visit. She is to spend the summer there—observing, participating, and writing. We know little about her, beyond her vocation as a writer; she is of course often taken to be a figure for Jewett herself or the local color writer as a type. In Dunnet she discovers precisely what she had sought: “the unchanged shores of the pointed Firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities, all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told.”

The novel unfolds over the course of twelve chapters, most introducing different characters, all of whom are eccentric in one way or another. Most chapters are stationed in different parts of Dunnet and its environs, domestic and natural. The narrator lodges with Mrs. Todd, a sort of Virgil to the narrator’s pilgrim—an older widow, an herbal healer, and community matriarch; she is the relational thread binding the narrator’s journeys, often guiding the narrator to meetings with different characters, including her own mother and brother, who live on a nearby island. The conversations in which our narrator engages, and the stories she is told, nearly all concern the past—Dunnet (it’s done) is almost entirely backward-looking. The novel is sequenced by three major departures from its diegetic norm, two temporal

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and one locational: the narrator’s interview with the town’s isolated, troubled man of letters, Littlepage, who tells a lengthy embedded narrative; a trip to the hermitage of a long-dead exile, Joanna; and a culminating Bowden family reunion (Mrs. Todd is a Bowden) in a town reached after a morning’s ride. All of the novel’s episodes are underlain by a dual trajectory of narrative purpose: the rendering and description of this dying world in miniature—a sort of naturalism—and the assimilation of the narrator into the community—a sort of realism. This forward movement is conjoined with the backward-looking temporality of decline and the many stories of loss that so acutely reflect it.

The history of the critical discourse on local color makes clear a recursive relationship between *Firs* and the literary system. By literary system, which will be an important idea in this chapter, I refer to the functionally differentiated system that comprises writers, readers, genres, styles, the critical apparatus, and the publishing apparatus. A rhetoric of littleness is a crucial mediator between *Firs*, its genre, and the wider literary system in which it is actuated. This metaphorics of the miniature is evident in the words of its advocates, detractors, past critics (and present ones), practitioners, and the fictions themselves. As Brodhead notes, “The issue of size or scale has formed part of every reckoning of Jewett.”6 The very name local color has encoded within it a double diminution, indicating a secondary quality (color) of what is itself secondary in scope to the national (the local). Take Frank Norris on Zola—“no teacup tragedies here.”7 Surely Norris has Jewett in mind here, when we consider that a broken teacup (“the pieces wropped [sic] in paper”) figures prominently in *Firs*. A contemporary reviewer for *The Critic* wrote “She

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6 Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 163.

may, like Virgil’s shepherd, sing a slender song, but her vocalization is beyond reproach and almost beyond praise.”

Henry James referred to *Firs* as Jewett’s “Beautiful little quantum of achievement.”

Jewett’s acolyte Willa Cather wrote in an introduction to *Firs* that “[Jewett] was content to be slight if she could be true.”

These are just a few examples of the rhetoric of the minor that generatively links the rhetoric of the literary system to the representational protocols of the genre, and the self-reference of its writers. In a letter to Horace Scudder, Jewett writes, “I seem impressive, but really I only come up to my shoulder.” For example, within *Firs* itself our narrator reports “I hung my hat and luncheon-basket on an entry nail as if I were a small scholar…”, and says of a deceased resident of the town, “‘I wonder where she is and what she knows of the little world she left’” (383, 482).

Recent criticism of course plays no part in the original feedback loops between the literary system and the novel’s form. Such criticism nonetheless narrows its scope as if repeating the terms of the critical discourse contemporary to the novel. Rather than viewing the little world as containing and being contained by many worlds, the criticism is narrowly focalized. This is by no means a pejorative assessment. Rather, it points to the tendency of local color literature to promote certain terms of its own reception. Consider two of the most notable recent discussions of the novel. In Bill Brown’s account of *Firs*, his focus is the museal—specifically, how in the 1890s culture becomes conceivable and lends itself to reification as a museal exhibit, and how a conflation of person and background, of agent and context, follows from that. This conflation

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11 Quoted in Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*. 82
precipitates or leaves outstanding a small and unassimilable remainder, “the singularity of the subject” “beyond the reach of anthropology.”\textsuperscript{12} For Jennifer Fleissner, writing on the novel as belonging to the genre of naturalism, the focus is on two models of culture exemplified by characters in the novel, a “dialectics between the two feminist views of domesticity and maternity [“the ultradomestic characters and the restless adventurers”]”.\textsuperscript{13} Both Brown and Fleissner do important work in expanding our understanding of the social and cultural content of the novel, but their contextualizations largely center on objects of representation, like people and objects, within the geography of the fictional world.

In a recent article, Hsuan L. Hsu considers the novel from a global perspective, arguing that works like \textit{Firs} incorporate “regionalist aesthetics into larger contexts, these texts demonstrate that affect originates not only in isolated, local communities but also in the broader spaces of transnational capitalism.”\textsuperscript{14} He reverses the isolation of Dunnet and situates the town within a world system: “Jewett shows how a community fused together by deeply rooted feelings and day-to-day interactions depends, both economically and emotionally, on commodities and experiences acquired abroad.”\textsuperscript{15} Localness is dialectically entwined with globality, and not conceivable as a form without it—the little suggests the big, which is offsite. My concerns lie with exploring how \textit{Firs} is itself global. It produces and reflects on globality, rather than arriving at a sense of the global through contiguity with the metonymic traces of the big historical world.


\textsuperscript{14} Hsuan L. Hu, "Literature and Regional Production," \textit{American Literary History} 17, No. 1 (Spring 2005), 36-69, 37.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 43.
Instead of objects of culture in the world, or a geography dependent on contiguity, as if *Firs* always referred to a map lateral to the page, a more holistic account will make clear the scope of the novel’s concerns, which extend across time, space, and genre. One initial semantic and conceptual adjustment must be made here: rather than the globe, which evokes a material geography, I want to think of the idea of world and world-making, as I have been using it so far in this project. It permits a coupling of storyworld with considerations of figuration, self-reference, and narrative form. *Firs* builds its world by figuring within itself many differentiated levels of spatial, temporal, and systemic reference. These range from the time of the town to the broad duration of literary history, and from the space of the town to the outer limits of a speculative, gothic wasteland. *Firs* becomes vast in its smallness, and observes itself amid this vastness.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs*’ world is one that is also arriving at its end. As Cather said of *Firs*’ place among American novels (along with the place of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), “I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely.”

The novel also faces—and encodes—time and change of a different order: its own reflexive time of change within the literary system. Local color was a factor in the literary marketplace from roughly the 1870s to the late 1890s, reaching the heights of its short-lived esteem in the early 90s. Hamlin Garland, in his 1894 study-cum-manifesto, *Crumbling Idols*, wrote that local color “will redeem American literature.”

His prediction would not be borne

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out. As Donna M. Campbell notes, “By the time Garland wrote Crumbling Idols… the converted were rapidly becoming the disenchanted.”\(^{18}\) Campbell also remarks that “[a]s the style and method of local color became the subject of parody, one obvious transformation resulted as its themes of retreat into the past merged with, or became transmogrified into, the full-blown escape possible in historical romances.”\(^{19}\) It so happens, then, that the generic apogee of a literature about dying places, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in 1896, arrives at a moment of generic dying, conceived of as waning market presence and the stylistic terminability of parody—as Jewett writes in *Firs* of the tansy (a flower of the daisy family), they are “bound to make the most of themselves before they die.” (383) Jewett’s own late phase, between 1896 and 1904, after which chronic illness puts an end to her writing fiction, encapsulates the movement from local color to historical romance: “the serialization of *The Tory Lover* (1900-1901), Jewett’s own effort in the genre, conveniently marks the end of an era.”\(^{20}\) Thematic and stylistic valences of local color would persist, but the program of the genre as practiced by Jewett, and its internal reflexivity concerning its function within the literary system, would fade. The death of the community (as represented in the novel), the death of the writing of the community (the genre of local color), and the death of the community as writing (its reflexivity concerning this writing and its own destiny), are all cross-referential. Necessarily, they are bound up in considerations of both narrative time and another order of time, the time of letters (or communication) in the extraliterary world.

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\(^{19}\) Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism*, 48.

What I want to suggest, then, is that at the levels of discourse and story, *Firs* is tightly coupled to the literary system, and it evinces a rhetoric that cross-references the literary system and its own place there. As such, *Firs* is at once determined by, and reflective upon, the very nature of this coupling. Following from this, depictions of matter and action in *Firs* resonate with their exterior, because personal littleness and loss both mirrors and is determined by the rhetoric of generic littleness and the loss of the genre. This is a clue to one of the many constitutive paradoxes of local color: in its enclosure, it encodes and figures its exterior. The other point, of course, is that the exterior that the novel figures is itself an interior, because the novel is an operationally-closed form—these outsides always enter back into it, increasing its internal differentiations, and so increasing its complexity.

2.

In the next three sections, I want to describe the operative principles of the dying world of Dunnet Landing, the town that is the diegetic ground zero of the novel—how it is made, who lives there, what they do, how it works, how it dies. Dunnet is not a normal town, to say the least, and describing its world will mean elucidating its many operative paradoxes, and showing how to be a tourist in Dunnet—something that can be said of both the narrator and the novel—means to at all times survey the town as a place in excess of the town itself.

Dunnet Landing is a formerly prosperous coastal community verging on collapse: “There, how times have changed; how few seafarin’ families there are left!” (428) The town has no future: the shipping industry has dried up, decimating the regional economy; few men or women of procreative age seem to remain; no children are present in the novel, save a single, discomfiting instance of the narrator hearing “gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that
was going seaward full of boys and girls," as if the children are being ferried into some abyss.
The final words of the novel, as the narrator departs by sea, “and Dunnet Landing and all its
coasts were lost to sight,” are clear in their figural aspect—the phenomenal loss figures an
existential loss (444, 487). In the case of *Firs*, the encroaching finitude of both community and
genre are cross-referential; while Dunnet’s decline reflects certain historical conditions extrinsic
to the literary system—the contraction of the shipping industry in New England, Gilded Age
anxieties symptomatized as antimodernism, nativist sentiment and white birthrate panic—the
novel also performs the elegy of its own waning generic precedence. The death of Dunnet will
be practically about the death of a genre, symptomatized by its economic and demographic
collapse; it will be symbolically about the death of worlds more generally, because the
representation of decline in Dunnet allegorizes a general equivalence of how worlds die. In this
respect, then, life and death move from locally naturalized levels, like characters and landscapes,
to systemic ones, like discourse networks, rendering them recursive and reciprocally figurative.

We can begin at the beginning, in order to entertain a separate but cognate consideration,
that of the paradoxical temporality of this world. Why should *The Country of the Pointed Firs*
have been titled such? Specifically, why the selection of pointed firs? The title determines the
epithet for the fictional town of Dunnet Landing. Yet pointed firs seem no more topically or
symbolically resonant a natural feature of Dunnet Landing than a host of other possibilities. The
choice of title is largely arbitrary, and in that arbitrariness lies its significance, for it draws
attention to the first distinction that the novel draws, the first detail of the world constructed

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21 For an account of the relationship between *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and late-nineteenth/early-
twentieth-century white panic over “race suicide,” see Holly Jackson, “So We Die before Our Eyes:
264-284. For questions of Jewett’s local color and exclusionary strategies, see Stephanie Foote, “I Feared
to Find Myself a Foreigner”: Revisiting Regionalism in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed
within it. The marking of pointed firs is shortly met by the seemingly unmotivated fact that the novel is a duplication without an original: “After a brief first visit made two or three summers before…a lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the unchanged shores of pointed firs” (377). True, this odd notice—no further mention of which is made—predicates familiarity, and so expediently furnishes the narrator with a tonal ease consistent with the style of local color. It also establishes that Dunnet Landing has a long, stable history prior to our privileged observation of it. However, here the novel references a central paradox: it returns to a Dunnet Landing to which it has never turned, and so it must continually enfold a new and an old that are equally new. The status of *Firs* as an instance of generic apogee at a moment of decline within the broader literary system is therefore encoded within the novel as a salience given to this paradox. What this means, in effect, is that the novel is at once overdetermined and speculative. It must establish a world, yet it must repeatedly program a present that continually reintroduces and flattens the distinction between the past and the present as an aspect of its autopoeisis, by which I mean the recursive generation of a system from its own components. At the formal level, the way the world collapses is what structures the world, which, self-referentially, plays out the collapse of a genre that per convention produces collapsing worlds.

This cat’s cradle of sorts situates the novel upon two cross-referential temporal tracks. There is the diegetic time of the story world, of Dunnet and its people, the time of the principle plot of decline, referentially contiguous to economic and social history. There is also the very different time of the literary system and its byproduct, a novel. The time of the literary system is an inferable presence and code rather than the mimesis of phenomenological time in the story world. This is a novel unusually receptive to temporal questions, concerning these two modes of temporalizing the world, looped back into its reflexivity concerning its status as a declining form.
This double temporal tracking also allows the novel to account for its origin and fate as a fictional world and as a material-medial artifact. These temporal tracks will also allow several scalar expansions of the novel’s temporal horizon, reaching into the distant past and the unknown future. The novel watches itself in time, because even on local color’s own terms observation is the virtual sine qua non of the genre, “the trope… of the visitor who frames, interprets, and/or invades the scene, as in Jewett’s narrators….”  

22 That “scene ” is radically expanded to include observational possibilities well outside of a local geography, while remaining within the generic dictates of local color.

3.

Dunnet Landing would seem to be a mappable world sustained through its own organic processes. Consider the following two examples from the beginning of the novel:

…the unchanged shores of the pointed Firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities… (377)

You could always tell when she was stepping about there…and [you] learned to know, in the course of a few weeks’ experience, in exactly which corner of the garden she might be. (378)

The town is a discrete place, physically and organically enclosed, the predictable ebb and flow of customs like the predictable ebb and flow of the tides on the shore. In the second example, we have a more particular mapping. This is an exemplary reiterative, the narrative formalization of repetitive acts or states signified by a single instance. What the reiterative does here is to largely deflate the probabilistic calculus so central to naturalism. And it would seem to deflate the very probabilistic qualities of history, just as it negates some of the very problems of historicism itself, the determination of cause and effect. To observe here is to have the direction of history unfold

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before you as a humble and unchanging providence. Consider this the referential level in the work, the way in which an observer observes how the world produces and reproduces itself.

Except it is not so simple, because Dunnet is at once timeless and collapsing. The novel quickly moves into a far more complex account of the relationship between reference, figuration, and time. What moves the world here is something different from ecological and social reiteration. The governing medium of exchange in the novel, within Dunnet (and so the novel self-referentially) is not money, but discourse, information—news, stories, facts, sentiments. Information is what mediates between the naturalized world and the worlding abstraction of systems, because both need it to reproduce themselves. I want to show the effects of a world that is constructed in accordance with its lack of information flow. Below, I want to account for some of the systemic effects of this lack of information, in particular how communication between characters works and how character is constructed in the abstract in a such a world.

Dunnet Landing is set forth as an imaginary model of a discourse network, what Friedrich Kittler calls “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data.”23 As we will see below, for Dunnet Landing the relevant data is any data about Dunnet Landing. The very topography of the area—communication materialized as pathways facilitating the exchanges upon which the genre of local color is dependent—halfway literalizes the relative abstraction of a discourse network: in Dunnet’s case, “the constant interest and intercourse that had linked the far island and these scattered farms into a golden chain of love and dependence” (352). What might be thought of as a native information economy regulates the autopoeisis of the town, its ability to reproduce and maintain itself; indeed, it patterns its very topology. The islands and farms linked are not just locational

metonymies for their inhabitants, but are themselves semaphores: “Green island…the small white house standing like a beacon” (381). The ecology of *Firs* emits atmospheric pathways of information that aggravate the human need to speak and listen: “I do not know what odor of the night it was that used sometimes to send out a penetrating odor late in the evening, after the dew had fallen, and the moon was high, and the cool air came up from the sea. Then Mrs. Todd would feel that she must talk to somebody, and I was only too glad to listen” (381). At times these figurations and literalizations of topography and ecology as materialities of communication work in extraordinarily self-referential fashion. What is exchanged are stories—they are, quite literally, local color stories. This is not a money economy, nor the socialist or barter economy sometimes attributed by critics (what Thomas Strachyz characterizes as “Jewett’s embrace of both non-market and small-market activity”). Rather, it is a sort of organicist information economy, communication and organic matter enfolded—“A few late mullein leaves that were drying on a newspaper in the little loft,” “I gave the message about the mackerel to Mrs. Todd” (469, 482).

As such, the novel continually unfolds reports of itself into itself as its own diegetic and bodily content and figuration, rotating these distinctions like mullein leaves and newspapers each revolving as medium for the other’s form.

Hsuan L. Hsu argues that “Jewett shows how a community fused together by deeply rooted feelings and day-to-day interactions depends, both economically and emotionally, on commodities and experiences acquired abroad.” It must be stressed, however, that this fusion and dependence is anchored in a preterite—the continuance of a now parasitic past in the present

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25 Hsuan, ”Literature and Regional Production,” 43.
— because Dunnet Landing is a place severed from the network of global trade and communication to which it once belonged. From an economic standpoint, Dunnet Landing is expiring because of the ramifications of the collapse of the shipping industry and its circulation of bodies and goods. Yet a more insistent problem is a collapse of discursive input, a sundering of any communicational circuit of system (Dunnet) and environment (the world outside it), and the decay of the discourse network. Such a collapse is causally determined and enabled as a representational possibility by the economic one, and articulative of both generic finitude and the paradox of local color. Since communication is what vitalizes the social ecology of Dunnet, what happens when we take seriously the lamentation of the town’s resident bibliophile, Littlepage—that Dunnet as “a community…is shut up to its own affairs”? (390) Communications in Dunnet Landing are almost solely self-referential, recursively communicating only the fact of their occurrence or referencing (and recirculating) what has elapsed in Dunnet past. Interactions in Dunnet are people talking about Dunnet, which is, as we have seen, what Dunnet is (it is its own materiality of communication): “His sister Todd occupied the time and told all the news there was to tell of Dunnet Landing and its coasts” (414). No better instance from the novel illustrates this than when Mrs. Todd and her friend Mrs. Fosdick—one of the few visitors from the outside, who shares news solely of the inside—are observed by the narrator: “That very first evening my friends plunged into a borderless sea of reminiscences and personal views” (424). This borderless border—these are memories and views, things almost axiomatically limited—is less of a contradiction than it might at first appear, because in Dunnet reminiscences and personal views can be recycled until no one is left to exchange them. Consider this state of affairs the terminal operational closure of Dunnet Landing: its closure to anything outside itself and the way it mines itself from itself as it disappears, like the late works of a genre. The paradox here is that
this novel about a collapse by sameness results in an incredibly complex and differentiated
narrative and rhetorical form. The novel recursively produces the formal newness of its oldness.

The Dunnet of late, a community “shut up to its own affairs,” models the way in which a
hermetically isolated system circulates content internal to itself. Its news, for instance, is always
the local news, Mrs. Todd’s “very commonplace news of the day”—which is news and not-news,
because it is commonplace, and all of a common place. Perhaps no surprise, then, that our
narrator soon begins “to wish…for news of the outside world, which had been, half
unconsciously, forgotten” (19, 26). In this sewn-up and absent-minded (“half unconsciously”)
Dunnet, the lack of news stories is coextensive with the lack of new stories—“I thought by the
polite absent-minded smile on Mrs. Todd’s face this was no new story” (78). In lieu of outside
input, Dunnet Landing is deprived of the interdisciplinary couplings that systems (like
disciplines, and genres) require as a result of what David Wellbery calls their “dependence upon
a constant regeneration of surprise” and “the interplay of redundancy and variety.”26 Littlepage
recalls that “[a] shipmaster was apt to get the habit of reading,” but when there are no more
shipmasters there are no readers. For him, “a community narrows down and grows dreadful
ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs” (391, 392). Dunnet makes itself from itself, and as
it drifts away its connective tissue erodes, so it has less and less of itself to recirculate, “…he had
nobody with whom to speak his own language or find companionship” (450). Broadly speaking,
we can think of the missing element here as information. Following Claude Shannon, we
conceive of information as “a negative logarithm of the probability of a particular message being
chosen from a set of finite options,” which is to say the fewer the options and the likelier the

26 David Wellbery, “The General Enters the Library: A Note on Disciplines and Complexity,” Critical
probability, the less information. This drying up of information is a sort of endgame of genre. This, we might note, accords with Mark Seltzer’s observation that “[o]ne of the most striking indices of the naturalist aesthetic… is just this close link between generation and degradation, or, more simply between reproduction and death.” We see this very paradox reproduced at the level of form, the form of the novel inserted into the very thermodynamics it represents in its storyworld, as degradation generates complexity, and death reproduces.

Dunnet’s decline also serves as a governing logic of the novel’s character system, which is itself succumbing to effects of entropy. Here is Mrs. Todd’s friend, Mrs. Fosdick, lamenting the social ecology of Dunnet: “What a lot o’ queer folks there used to be about here, anyway, when we was young, Almiry. Everybody’s just like everybody else, now…” (82). This proclamation of sameness—“Everybody’s just like everybody else, now”—is duly literalized in the relationships between people in Dunnet. At the level of social role, it is articulated in the positional rotations of the Blackett/Todd family, in which elder son becomes younger son (“He was about sixty…I felt all the time as if one must try to make the occasion easy for some one who was young and new to the affairs of life”), son becomes daughter (”William has been son and daughter both since you were married off the island”), mother becomes daughter’s daughter and daughter becomes mother’s mother (“There, mother, what a girl you be! I am so pleased! I was just bewailin’ you”, said the daughter…’), and younger boarder becomes elder host to her elder host become younger boarder (“As they came up the walk together, laughing like girls, I fled, full of cares, to the kitchen…”) (60, 55, 109 74).


Consider Alex Woloch’s compelling structuralist account of the character-system in the realist novel, “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure.” This system is “asymmetrically” committed to a representation of the whole of society, yet this expansiveness comes at the cost of a range of flat characters who function to promote the rounded development of the novel’s protagonist. To develop the protagonist, the character system unequally distributes narrative attention to her, in a manner that renders discourse an allegory of story, which is to say that the preponderance of character-space accorded to her mirrors the story of her own psychological development. While Woloch’s conception of the character system is referentially true here, insofar as there are multiple and differentiated character-spaces—many people, many stories— the system is structurally baffled. Instead of discrete minor characters (the many), we end up with one composite, relational character, a sort of characterological algorithm that combines and repeats characterological attributes. In this way, the realist character system persists—technically, there is a one and a many—but its discursive arrangement is homologous to the other areas of mixed-up degeneration in the novel. Character and systemic death are recursive, just like Dunnet Landing and systemic death. The conventional ontological distinctiveness of the realist character, even in its flatness, is in Firs subordinated to a figural system central to the autogenesis of the world of the novel. This figural system is one that abstracts aspects of the storyworld—character, place, plot—and draws them into relation with impersonal and non-local likenesses, like systemic entropy, information flows, the literary system. These are indifferent to both the realist character system and the representational limitations of some strict adherence to the local. They exert an inner pressure upon Firs locality.

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and realist premises, by increasingly expanding and differentiating levels of reference, pulling us away from the storyworld as it becomes a figure within a much larger, more complex form.

4.

Here I would like to provide a more detailed account of the novel’s figural system, which mediates between world and storyworld, and allows for scalar expansions and dilation.

Consider the following:

…the conversation became at once professional after the briefest preliminaries, and he would stand twirling a sweet-scented sprig in his fingers. (379)
She stood in the centre of a braided rug, and its rings black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl… (381)

At the end, near the woods, we could climb up on it [a huge shape of stone]… there above the circle of pointed Firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island-ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,—that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give. (413)

In all three passages, we note the recurrence of circular, orbiting forms. In the first passage, the fingers of a doctor turn in a phatic gesture, and they turn a sprig—fingers and sprigs, parts of wholes—as if rotating conversation and rotating nature were entwined microcosms of a grander orbiting. The twirling sprig figures an instrument of inscription, the image of a world rendering itself. This same image anchors the observed interaction that is a necessary precondition of the rendering of this world. In the second passage, Mrs. Todd stands like a planet in the center of a Ptolemaic universe, as the concentricities of the carpet are arrayed around her like satellite planets in orbit. In the final passage, which occurs during the social occasion of our narrator and Mrs. Todd’s brother, William Blackett, on a walk, orders of magnitude increase and the world radiates outwards from the titular pointed firs toward the concentricity of the ocean and
then the magisterial limit of the encircling horizon. Outer ocean as environment returns to the marked side that is Dunnet Landing, and the horizon marks the outermost boundary of observational possibility. In each instance the novel constitutes and surveys its form. Crucial here is that each internal form, from sprig to ocean, is at once the miniature and the maximal, each in its moment of visibility a figure for the world and its making. While the referential necessarily maintains a certain primacy, and nature is relayed to the social act that occasioned its observation (in short, realism), the novel patterns no scalar hierarchy. The outermost horizon only indicates limit as such to the materials with which the world has to work and to what it can see. Instead of a hierarchy, these highly formalized scenes relate in a sort of concentric, processual metonymy, such that each is a variant image of the other. The autogenesis of the world and the linkage of systemic organization to social forms—carpets to outer boundaries—at once organizes and provides a semic and thematic coloring to the world.

The circular organization and sense of communicative exchange implicitly makes these reversals of figure and ground exchangeable with the figurations of communicational entropy we saw, binding them metaphorically. The turning of the carpet is also a figure in miniature for the rotational discourse network and its decay. Levels are metonymically linked into a world that is at once a figural system—an exchange of topography, ecological rhythms, economic processes, discourse networks, the cross-referenced literary system and the novel as genre and object. In this way, the novel at once renders itself perpetually at odds with itself and works towards a certain totalization by way of linking the social with the figurative, life with death, the novel and the system, and the human and the rhetorical, and then observing it.
This figural system can be further clarified by setting *Firs* in relation to the broader movement of which local color is often considered an offshoot, American literary naturalism, and by considering the role of identicality and contingency in naturalism and *Firs*. *Firs* certainly has some of the core generic markers of naturalism—among them, organic and information systems governed by the law of thermodynamics, and its fascination with individuals, populations, inherited characteristics, and degeneration. Naturalism hinges on the relentless operativity of chance, often figured in objects like coins and cards—from the glimmering hoard of Trina McTeague, which will lead to her murder, to the lethal dealings in Crane and their frantic outcomes. The very motions of the naturalist novel—with its sense of contingency, the going wrong of best laid plans—encodes chance, and its narrative effect is often an internal diversion from any unidirectionality. Naturalism reflects on that contingency directly, surveying it from the perspective of its own topical and philosophical concerns.

I would like to briefly turn Walter Benn Michaels’ influential *The Gold Standard*. For Michaels, the gold standard itself is a sort of historicized ur-trope for naturalism. Rather than something that introduces noise (contingency, information, change) into a system—a figure of chance and its effects—the gold standard figures an impossible ideal of total self-coincidence. As Michaels writes, “It is the logic of the gold standard, the desire to make yourself equal to your face value, to become gold.”30 The logic is then the very opposite of something that introduces noise into a system. The gold standard would amount to the hush of a noiseless series, and a noiseless writing—a complete self-coinciding, all coins landing the same way. Yet Michaels argues that the gold standard is an impossible ambition, one that can only communicates a self-difference, which amounts to the continual introduction of noise into the naturalist novel: “It

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might be argued that the discourse of naturalism, as I characterize it, is above all obsessed with the manifestation of internal difference or, what comes to the same thing, personhood.”

Therefore, a sort of phantom game of chance presides over and above any of the represented game-like activity in the novels. It is the push and pull between identity and difference that creates the tensions in these novels, and their effects of violence.

In Michaels’ view, the naturalist novel agonizedly works towards a self-coincidence it cannot achieve. *Firs* is itself filled with games and tokens of contingency, though they might be easy to overlook: pieces like “a[n] little old leather box which contained the coral pin that Nathan Todd brought home to give to poor Joanna”—or characters as themselves tokens or coins—“we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line” (486, 461). Yet *Firs*, in its naturalism, seems very different from the logic that Michaels describes. The very capaciousness of *Firs*’ figural system in part depends on its rejection of the gold standard (crucially, Dunnet Landing is not a money economy). The self-difference that always undermines the ideal of the gold standard is operative in *Firs* as a virtual a priori, without the agonizing, obsessive drive for identically that is at work in other naturalisms. Information in *Firs* is indeed a sort of general equivalent in Dunnet Landing, somewhat like gold. *Firs* uncouples the gold standard from the fraught production of self-identity and subordinates it to world-production. The world incorporates itself and its observation, as storyworld, narrative form, and medial object, but necessitates formal means whereby the world can as if in stereoscopic measure include more of itself within itself, including reflexive figures of itself as novel. What this also means, and what we will see in the next section, is that the

31 Ibid., 21.
world or novel itself can be conceived of as a sort of token, an emblem of chance, and passed along, inside itself.

In turn, *Firs* positions itself in time and speculates on its relation to its two temporalities, mimetic and medial, generating its temporal framework and speculating on its fate within that framework. By mimetic, I mean history conceived of in the diegetic context of the storyworld, which incidentally cross-references the historical conditions of real regional economies. By medial time, I mean several related things: the literary system as a long and globalized dureé, the literary system as operative in turn of the century America, the novel as a material medial object within the past, present, and future of this system. Because of these temporal levels, in the novel every figuration of a social action in time signifies at a medial level, as well, turning human action into a means of novelistic self-reference.

5.

I want to shift here towards describing the expansive spatial and temporal scales in which *The Country of the Pointed Firs* situates itself, and how it figures as a token of chance to be passed along inside itself. The central thematic concerns of the novel—a reflexive awareness of death, mimetic and medial temporalities, growth and degeneration, information flow, sociality, and the boundaries of storyworlds and systems—are bound up in its concern with time and contingency. We have seen the mimetic time of the community of Dunnet Landing and the implied history of the town, as well as the self-reflexive medial time of the novel within the literary system, in its immediate relation to the dying local color genre. Each weave into an account of how systems—biological, informational, social—live and die more generally. But the novel also surveys itself as a contingent literary form within a vast sweep of the past, present, and future of literary history. It uses this surveying as a means of literary-historical self-
reference, in order to construct and observe its own generic protocols, and understand its historical location. But something more striking is at work: afforded such an extensive range of temporal and literary reference, and the internal differentiations that produces, the novel includes and observes itself as an object within a speculative frame—abutting other possible worlds, speculative futures, contingent possibilities.

By starting with a small event, we can begin to set out how the novel reflexively engages with the array of temporal scales it figures, and begin to see how it plays out speculative futures. The event is dessert at the Bowdoin family reunion. A moment of community and novel observing their past, present, and future, it is also a perfect example of the recursive world-formation of *Firs*.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator accompanies Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, to a family reunion, where the narrator feels “we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest line” (461). During the meal (“There never was a more generous out-of-door feast along the coast”) the narrator describes the item that foremost catch her eye, “an American pie” (465, 477).

Beside a delightful variety of material, the decorations went beyond all my former experience; dates and names were wrought in lines of pastry and frosting on the tops. There was even more elaborate reading matter on an excellent early-apple pie which we began to share and eat, precept upon precept. Mrs. Todd helped me generously to the whole word Bowden, and consumed reunion herself, save an undecipherable fragment; but the most renowned essay in cookery on the tables was a model of the old Bowden house made of durable gingerbread, with all the windows and doors in the right places… (134)

The written content of the pie—family name, and family history—consumed during an event dedicated to family name and family history, is inherently tautological, context-as-text and text-
as-context merging and consuming one another, together tracing an inward curve towards a common endpoint like the spirals on a nautilus shell. Here *Firs* extrudes an image of itself and its operations—the abyme of a written scene wherein a community consumes pastries with the community written on them. At the same time, the whimsical group practice represented is a modeling, an exemplary instance, of the content comprising the novel—observations of the behavior of regional individuals and groups in their native habitat. A very different figure signifies within the same scene, a miniaturized gingerbread model of the old Bowden house. An “essay in cookery,” the gingerbread house is a text whose subject is the way Dunnet makes itself from itself, and the scope of what is made. This house is an embedded joke, a visual pun, the small scope of local color literature suddenly appearing literalized in local color literature—the novel extruding a little model of itself, literal and figurative, as a sort of operations manual. The visual pun is a means for the novel and the community to observe itself, and in the encoded repetitions reify both the structure of observation and the structure of community as a functional unity. It is also the community’s and the novel’s accumulation of itself, its internal overlay that both allegorizes and enacts its absence of exterior throughput. This is the rapt world looking at the recording of its world in a scene of recursive world-formation. The world recognizes itself in its writing, and gathers around to read the book it is within.

The house is something like what Kate Marshall calls a doubly reflexive material metaphor—“concrete material structures that…doubly encode the reflexivity of writing technology and fictional technique.”32 Beyond that, this medial metaphor is a secondary vehicle for mobilizing the element of time literally encoded within it. The more Bowdens die, the fewer the new names and the fewer the remaining eaters. Eventually the miniaturization will exist

32 Kate Marshall, *Corridor*, 29.
without any people, and, without cooks or participants in ritual recognition of genealogy, which is a figure for the production of the genre as well as its worlds, the genre and its people ceases to exist. The world will have digested itself for the last time. Because it is couched in the terms of time and generation in a dying world, the scene is a ghostly prolepsis, a negative image of its own inhuman reoccurrence in a world with nobody—we are seeing, in some respects, ghosts from the future looking at their embodied past. Here we see an acute moment of our two temporalities at work, the mimetic and the medial, the time of the story world and the time of the circulation of works and letters, and the dialectic between the two so central to the autogenesis of this fictional world. Yet the medial time encoded here offers a position from which to outlast and observe the very scene in which it is figured, a place imbued with the odd awareness that the world now alive will one day be embalmed within the exact same representation in which it is now alive. The medial metaphor divagates from the story time of the scene, carrying it proleptically forward such that indefinite paths of future time angle off from the moment like rays of light refracting.

Accordingly, this double encoding of time is a good example of the reflexive dimension of contingency in the novel, an uncanny type of reflexivity in which the novel observes its own contingency as a generic formation in a long durée of literary history. The novel less incorporates than reflexively situates itself within a chronology and the semantic field of literary history. Literary allusions are scattered throughout the novel. The novel references (arranged chronologically in what follows) Greek mythology (Minerva, the sylph), Homer (“we might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory”), the Bible (“I thought he might have seen the little old Bible a-layin’ on the shelf close by him”), Shakespeare (“a great poet… he copied life”), Paradise Lost (“The greatest of poems”), Pilgrim’s Progress (“In all these there
were straggling processions walking in single-file, like old illustrations of the Pilgrim’s Progress”), and, not as inapposite as it might seem, Darwin (‘but as Darwin says in his autobiography, “there is no such king as a sea-captain he is greater even than a king or a schoolmaster!”’ (460, 438, 387, 459, 388)). These references do more than pay homage and offer a gesture of comparative humility or self-diminution. They certainly do not seem to be an audacious inclusion of the novel within an august lineage. Instead, they figure the plot of the novel as articulating multiple allegories of social and literary history. Consider Dunnet as an Edenic type (“among the grass grew such pennyroyal as the rest of the world could not provide”), become parabolic field in the social-catechismal journey of the everyman narrator voyaging across representative stations—Littlepage, say, as the Slough of Despond (416). The world of catechismal allegory itself becomes brutely historical because situated within a newer Darwinian reality clawing to pieces a timeless agrarian world.

The references offer further histories: in terms of a discourse of authorship, from the anonymity of myths, through the rise of the novel, to a professionalized authorial self-reference predicking the movement from realism into literary modernism. Thus, the novel encodes its lineage and then allegorizes this as a means of expansive self-reference relative to it. And so it is a natural history of the canon, and a canonical history leading to realism and naturalism, articulated in miniature and serving as an efficient cause for the very novel in which it is articulated. Time in Dunnet itself becomes microcosmic. The grand dilation of the old/new dialectic of local color now articulates its own universe as the diachronic figured in the synchronic, as a sort of world literary system. Couched in a Darwinian dispensation, it sees its own history as contingent, and so articulates that history within the very vein of naturalism, a literary movement that takes up contingency as a theme and structuring device. The everyday
phenomenological time of character is then doubled as diegetic act and representative act within a mass historical staging. The world can cast itself within this grand history and then regard that history as subject to the same thermodynamic laws that have dictated its own rise and fall. In this way the novel reflexively encodes scales of historicity—long global literary durée, national literary history, the circulation of letters in the time of a community, the time of the individual life of the reader. It reflects upon each doubly, from the perspective of the novel as a material medial artifact, and from the perspective of the lifeworld of the novel, in which the novel as material medial artifact is reflexively figured.

6.

I want to turn to an earlier episode in the novel, the narrator’s interview with the town’s eccentric reader, Captain Littlepage. Here she listens as he recounts an arctic journey taken years before. The story comprises an embedded narrative of two chapters, a sort of ice-locked gothic, spoken in the first-person by Littlepage. If the novel embeds a chronology of the literary canon as a means of reflexively situating its place in that history, and positing the historical causality that will result in its vanishing, here a more radical variant of that experiment occurs. *Firs* situates itself within an alternative genre within itself. The novel’s self-estrangement allows it to survey its own form and encode its unique generic protocols by observing its uncanny retelling in a different construction of reality and its rules. Yet this loop begins to dilate the generic primacy of local color, turning it into a stranger within itself.

It is Captain Littlepage (Jewett’s only, and rather glaring, moment of Dickensian naming), Dunnet’s lone reader, and a man regarded by the rest of the town as an eccentric and a crank, who laments a vanishing of discursive input to Dunnet. For Littlepage, input is the result
of reading, and a community that has stopped reading—or reads only about itself—is destined to wither. About a third of the way into the novel, the narrator visits Littlepage, a lengthy episode occurring over three chapters. The bulk of this episode is occupied by an embedded narrative, Littlepage’s recollections of a voyage he once took to the arctic. While voyaging, Littlepage’s ship became lost near “Parry’s discoveries,” a “thick and foggy” region in an arctic that is itself elapsing much like a world of local color (“There were but few Esquimaux left in that region” (393)). His ship founders, and he finds refuge in a Moravian mission, where he meets Gaffett, a Scottish captain “who had been one of those English exploring parties that found one end of the road to the north pole, but never could find the other” (394). Littlepage then relates to the narrator the story Gaffett told to him—a further embedded narrative, yet more recessive, as if moving to margins within margins—about his recent voyage upon “a ship that was lost on its return, and only Gaffett and two officers were saved off the Greenland coast” Before their rescue, now out of provisions, the three men try to locate a mysterious town marked on their map. What they find is a scene seemingly at variance from the generic sensibility of the rest of Firs. As Littlepage recounts:

They could see the place when they were approaching it by sea pretty near like any town, and thick with habitations; but all at once they lost sight of it altogether and when they got close they could see the shapes of folks, but they never could get near them—all blowing grey figures that would pass along alone, or sometimes gathered in companies as if they were watching. …Gaffett said that he and another man came near one o’ the fog-shaped men that was going along slow with the look of a pack on his back, among the rocks an’ they chased him; but, Lord! he flittered away out of sight like a leaf the wind takes with it, or a piece of cobweb. (396)

These words, from an ice-locked gothic, like something out of Poe’s oneiric arctic, will later echo in the final words of the novel, as the narrator describes her departure from Dunnet
—“when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight” (487). The real stake for our discussion here has less to do with symbolic correspondences than with the wholesale malfunction of narrative. Littlepage, for one, is largely unconcerned with the remarkable event and its possible meanings. Instead, he is concerned with the obsessive, failed attempt by Gaffett and later himself to transmit a record of it: “they came back…and wrote and wrote all next day in their notebooks,” “the men got orders not to talk over what they had seen,” “He said he was waiting to find the right men to tell…Once in a while they stopped to leave mail there or something.”, “He had all his directions written out,” “I wrote to him, and I done all I could” (396, 397, 397, 397-8). In other words, the real story for Littlepage is not the narrative, but the failure of communicating it. As a part of his story told to the narrator, the story and its failure are communicated. Dialectically it becomes a report (a story) of its own failure, encoding once again the logic of a world new and dying, in a gothic story about a ghostly world.

Littlepage’s story concerns one world—the phantasmic one seen by Gaffett—embedded in another—Littlepage’s later voyage in the arctic—embedded in another—the scene of the interview. The primary narrative and its embeddings are each assignable to a different literary genre, imbricated in one another—the local color novel, the gothic, and the novel of the sea, respectively. The novel of the sea instrumentalizes its name and serves as a channel between the other two both generically and topographically. Littlepage is torn from other books, and he knows it. His story is a refigured telling in miniature of the novel outside of it, a small world dying because of failures of transmissions to its inside, just as Littlepage’s story is about the failure of transmitting notice of a small world to its outside. In turn, this objectivation as failed letters of the novel outside, within another genre inside, is the world negatively figured by a
differentiated comparison to the world mediated by another genre, the gothic. Paradoxically, this self-alienation configures self-identity, accommodating a space of negative observation. And so the world internally establishes its self-identity and articulates and incorporates a variant hermeneutic of itself and its symptoms of decay, within and through different genres, within itself—dying worlds, failed messages. The world sees itself here by opposition to its own alien face, in the context of an interview (much like the catachreses and alien faces in the work of Stephen Crane).

Littlepage’s embedded gothic functions as a hermeneutic within the novel that allows the novel to generate and observe gothic elements in order to differentially survey the very generic protocols of local color. Recursively, these protocols are precisely what has enabled *Firs* to incorporate the gothic as distinct and mobilize it. The background that is local color, figured here by the implicit observational position of the interviewing narrator, becomes itself a sort of observer. It sees the contingency of its own world metaphorized in another as contingent letters and a contingent footnote to literary history. The observer of the world is, peculiarly, seeing from another one within the one. Because of this, it is not exactly seeing from the position of local color at all anymore. As the world was able to see itself abstractly in its broader informational context—as a system—here the world sees itself abstractly as a provisional datum in literary history. As such, it can conceptualize its own relativity, and render its emergence from the dialectics of genre as a mere possibility that came to pass. And so literary history, rather than a providential sweep, becomes itself a story of contingency. The determining factor in a stable ontology of literary worlds, the novel seems to reflexively suggest, is only context and means of communication—of inscribing, messages, responses, and uptake, within and between worlds. As such, it theorizes its own life and death within a general theory of historical causality. And this
mirrors the dialectic of its present state, in the story world of Dunnet and the one of the literary-systemic world to which it is cross-referenced. The very space of the interview almost floats in another world, carved out by the generic alterity of the embedded narrative. The novel in effect separates out genre from story, local color from gothic, entering these distinctions back into itself. Mechanizing its own genre as observational position, the novel observes an etiological historical vision of itself at its most general levels (story-world, generic representative, system), mediated by that ulterior genre. Fascinated by its own contingency, the novel figures Littlepage’s alien world within itself, in order to observe its world’s own relativity in relation to itself, what might have been and what might come to be.

We might pause here to note the rather startling way in which Jewett’s novel, rather than functioning nostalgically or reactively, precedes those later, better-known mythic substructures that seek to interpret, ironize, or even redeem the modern. Here I want to begin introducing some considerations of how *Firs* presages or otherwise speaks to literary modernism, as these questions will become central to the remainder of the chapter. Think here of the resuscitation of much earlier Anglo-Saxon and eastern literature in Pound, the farrago of classical influences in *The Waste Land* (no lack of card-games there, as well), and the typological relationship between *The Odyssey* and a day’s journey through Dublin in *Ulysses*. If some of those were tinged with a preemptive ironization, Jewett’s is the credulous impulse above the desire latent in that very irony, a credulity that nonetheless ironizes itself during its own course of development in *Firs*. Jewett, then, enunciates at one and the same moment the origin and internal tensions of these later projects, in a novel in which beginnings and ends, death and emergence, are ceaselessly entwined. Yet the mythic substratum in *Firs* is never in fact particularly ideological. It is extraterrestrial rather than subterranean, not a compensatory historical interpretant but a visible
field for understanding history—and the the history of communication—as governed by contingency. To be its own reflexive field allows the novel to become its own de-mythologized historical reader in a novel about history. Contingency, then, itself serves as a self-reflexive explanatory model for *Firs* itself as a novel that enacts changes in the inner form of the turn of the century realist novel.

7.

The worlding of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* includes so many self-referential and cross-referential levels within itself, is so internally differentiated, that it seems no longer local at all, neither spatially, thematically, nor temporally. Instead, its world-building forms something like an orrery, arranged concentrically, with a shifting center. The novel is structured so that Dunnet appears as but one sphere among the many, even if the novel’s figural structure depends on Dunnet’s mimetic content as its vehicle (its people, landscapes events). Even the novel, in its instances of self-reference, seems to figure itself as one sphere among many. But, paradoxically, *Firs* is the totality of that orrery, and so contains its own estranged forms, its own aliens.

To this point I have not explored one of the fundamental aspects of any literary realism, the figuration of characterological interiority. It is of particular importance to *Firs*’ local color given the genre’s themes of sympathetic identification, and the narrative and narratological function of the first-person observer. We can expect the broader figural system of the novel, which we have been exploring, to inflect the representation of interiority. Yet consciousness here is not simply an aspect of that figural system, but becomes indistinguishable from it. The novel’s interest in literary history, information flow, contingency, social forms and spatiality becomes the very form of interiority. Consciousness combining with its exterior makes for something like a
world that envelops itself—a total image of a self-making, self-perceiving, autogenic world constituted through its own internal differentiations. That totality, then, comes into view simultaneous to the novel taking apart the predicates of the social world of the novel, its history, its readers, which this autogenic novel no longer needs.

The Littlepage chapter just discussed in fact offers a small model of how interiority in *Firs* works—is a model of interiority—one that is entirely related to the content and context of the story Littlepage tells. Littlepage’s embedded narrative, with its account of novels, writers, and readers, generates something like a characterological interiority or roundness for the teller, Littlepage. But this is a somewhat uncanny roundness, since it recursively contains and is the result of its own literary history (for Littlepage, the gothic, the novel of the sea, local color). Opened up to view, interiority, which is not a discrete and irreducible product here, contains and is contained by contingent literatures and their contingent history. In turn, such a vision of interiority is only actuated by a social form like the interview, linking the production of interiority to a social form of communication that itself doubles as an act of reading, since the narrator is in effect reading Littlepage’s pages, just as we are. The interview unfolds in place—the room of a house, where two people are seated. This place, in its physicality, works as a circuit where a literal spatial form, the room, and a figural one, interiority, are superimposed on one another. Literal space and figural space are bound together in a sort of möbius strip, blurring the distinctions between the two. The representation of interiority—of consciousness—at once arises from the mimetic qualities of realism (bodies, interviews, letter-writing, sea voyages, etc.) but also from its figuration in and as space. In effect, this lends valences of consciousness to the spatialized world. In this way, characterological interiority becomes positively constituted, rather
than deconstructed, and it emerges in tandem with a reciprocal figuration of consciousness for the world—a loop we have already seen, in a very different framework, in Crane.

In terms of the encoding of emergent changes in the novel form, the dynamic of interiority described above looks oddly like a prehistory of what Kate Marshall has called “corridoricity”—“the strange reflection the corridor [as architecture] enacts of other spaces and its boundedness to structures of fictionality and mediation.” The corridor is the site where “the figurative constitution of persons happen,” which presupposes the “the logics of separation of the corridor” as an organizational feature. Yet this is a novel where the figurative constitution of people happens in a space where there are virtually no enclosed corridors but rather pseudo-corridors in the outside environment, earthen pathways, channels on the water, wagon-roads. Such unenclosed passageways figure the characterological porousness, the intense externality, of local color characters. They also demonstrate the novel’s recourse to reflexive generic spaces—literary spaces and spaces of literature—rather than architectural space or infrastructure as the predominant constitutive of interiority.

As I mentioned in the chapter on Stephen Crane, our categories for first-person narrators in novels—particularly those in realism—remain stubbornly indebted to the immensely influential accounts of Henry James, Percy Lubbock, and Wayne Booth. Correlating epistemological concerns like the reliability of observation and interpretation with ethical concerns, they implicitly posit a human intentionality as the only plausible gauge of any first-person narrator. Our narrator in Firs, for example, would resemble Booth’s “disguised narrator,”

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33 Marshall, Corridors, 7.

34 Ibid., 36.
someone present in diegesis but largely self-effacing.\textsuperscript{35} I have mentioned earlier that the realism/naturalism distinction in \textit{Firs} is real and important because the bildungs (or künstler) form occurs within a naturalism. Yet I have also stressed that \textit{Firs'} is a naturalism that differs from many of our conceptions of how naturalism works, principally in the expansiveness of its tropic system and its lack of any compulsory grasp at self-coincidence. An inclusion into community—“a deeper intimacy soon began”—is the particular form of the local color bildungsroman: the narrator growing close with Mrs. Todd, becoming an ever more trusted recipient of confidences, gaining an intuitive sense of the community’s structure of feeling, and, as if ratifying all this, attending the Bowden family reunion as an honorary member near the end of the novel (“Would you like to have me go to?” I asked frankly, but not without a humble fear that I might have mistaken the purpose of this latest plan. “Oh certain, dear!” answered my friend affectionately” (447)). This is an anthropological and even ontological bildungs rather than any reconciliation of the momentarily wayward youth to the market-governed bourgeois world. Drawing from critics like Richard Brodhead and Nancy Glazener, for whom the narrator is proxy for a writer of the metropolitan literary establishment, writing back to it from the agrarian margins, the bildungsroman might be regarded as itself a disguised künstlerroman, our novel the very materiality of the narrator-as-proxy’s performance.

Like any homodiegetic narrator—a narrator within the storyworld—our narrator functions as a structuring optic. She focalizes the visible in a manner proportionate to the human eye (sans prosthetics), and mobilizes that focalization in her movements from geographical station to station. For Woloch, we recall, the character system in realism, by subordinating minor characters to flat functionality, exists to hasten the development and psychological complexity of

the protagonist. Yet we have seen that the character system in *Firs* is an entropic one. In its entropic rotation of identities, which renders every minor character identical and distinct at once, the position of the narrator would need to be somehow abstracted from this system to achieve the realist bildungs. And yet our narrator, while structurally incapable of occupying the same character space as a minor character, is remarkably self-effacing, or effaced, as if she were no more substantial than the reiterative minor characters, but merely insubstantial in a different way. Beyond her seeing and describing, her own commentary is often restricted to allusions, little sallies of irony, or brief laments about the ache of losses and unrealized dreams. These seem less like the representation of a mind than the hazy sketching of one. As Francesca Sawaya notices, “The cipherlike quality of the narrator, then, is part of the same way in which the “I” just as easily becomes the “one,” “you,” or “we” in the novel.”

Sawaya argues this point with reference to the way the narrator-as-tourist paradoxically entails a universalizing perspective. But for my purposes, the point can be inflected to mean that the first-person in *Firs* is incorporated into the algebra of the non-realist realist character system, with a due perspectival distinction.

Through such a porousness of identity, such slippage of feasible pronouns, the structural position of the narrator as first-person and focalizer becomes that of a phantom cogito, a sort of floating subjectivity, attachable to various subjects by sensory perception or social interaction. At the same time, she remains sufficiently distinct to secure her observational autonomy: “I often wondered a great deal about the inner life and thought of these self-contained old fisherman; their minds seemed to be fixed upon nature and the elements rather than upon any contrivances

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of man, like politics or theology” (474). In short, she is not a first-person narrator as James or Booth conceives of it, because, at the last, her modality complicates any personological centeredness. Simultaneously, she is structurally predicated on her perspectival distinction. As a sort of floating cogito, and an anonymous tourist in the referential field of the novel, the narrator can stand in for anyone else, and even access (and so form) their interiority, upon one crucial condition: that other character must be a reader. This, ultimately, is the fundamental distinction between those of Dunnet and those not of it—between non-readers like Mrs. Todd and readers like the narrator and Littlepage. And to be a reader here is to have something like an interiority, although it is a form of interiority hardly recognizable in relation to many earlier American realisms.

I want to chart in some detail how the novel figures the interiority of its narrator during a crucial series of chapters. It does this through the embedded narrative of Joanna, the novel’s second lengthy embedded narrative. Her story, which is inseparable from the figuration of the narrator’s interiority, collapses the distinctions between the individual and the group, mind and world, self-reference and other-reference, reference and figure. Interiority becomes the figural system of the novel. And the collapse of these distinctions means the collapse of the generic predicates of the realist novel. Firs, drawing from literary history, will allegorize this collapse quite specifically. We will see how this leads to the novel’s astonishing final moments, when in the wake of the collapse of the generic predicates of literary realism the figural system itself assumes creative autonomy. It begins to see another novel—one that looks like an oneiric vision of a modernism yet to exist—and, like a letter carried aboard a vessel, directs that speculative novel into futurity.
The Joanna episode takes up three chapters—roughly one-fifth of the novel. The narrator learns about Joanna during a conversation with Mrs. Todd and her close friend, Mrs. Fosdick. The story of Joanna is divided into two chapters of embedded narrative, one narrated by Mrs. Fosdick and one Mrs. Todd. A third chapter then details the narrator’s visit to Joanna’s former hermitage, Shell-heap island. We learn that Joanna, now many years dead, had been “crossed by love” when a suitor spurned her (429). In her pain she commits what in her own words is the “unpardonable sin” of having “‘thoughts…wicked toward God’” (439). She retires to the isolated Shell-heap Island, “‘Perhaps thirty acres, rocks and all’” (430). She goes as one “done with the world” (439). Critics have often taken this removal from the world at face value—except, crucially, the world is not done with Joanna: “Why, the waters round Shell-heap Island were white with sails that fall”; “There was a good many old friends had Joanna on their minds”; “Yes, how everyone used to notice whether there was smoke out of the chimney! The Black Island folks could see her with their spy-glass…” (431, 431, 432). This place purportedly outside the world is on constant display within it, and what is outside of this world has the world as its environment, and, later, as its very content.

Drawn to Joanna, the narrator arranges to be taken to Shell-heap island, which she finds empty of all traces of Joanna. Despite the seeming isolation of the island, a place and person “done with the world” cannot fail but communicate back to the world as news: “There is something in the fact of a hermitage that cannot fail to touch the imagination; the recluses are a sad kindred, but they are never commonplace” (442). We might recall that news within Dunnet is never new, because it is always redundancy, “commonplace news” (381). Already news to the world, Joanna is not exactly alone herself—she is “valiant enough to live alone with her poor insistent human nature and the calms and passions of the sea and sky” (444). Not only is she
alone with the essential but impersonal company of human nature (everyone except any particular one), she is also alone with an absolute portion of emotion disseminated like weather by the world from which she sought to escape—“I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna…must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of the hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world” (444-5). In other words, the possibility of the aloneness of the psyche or self—of consciousness on its own, a world unto itself—is voided. It is voided narratively, because the narrator sees the inside externalized, and it is foreclosed in terms of a theory of the subject (or non-subject), because such disseminations visibly predicate the interior upon its exteriority. This means Joanna is something like the recursive effect of the perpetual interview between self and world, and the narrator can reconstitute that vanished interview through a secondary speculative and specular one (“I knew, as if she had told me.”). As peculiar as it might seem at first blush, what the novel is doing here is providing a sort of systems-theoretical allegory of consciousness in relation to a social system. For Niklas Luhmann, though consciousness is operationally closed, “its self-reproduction has a chance for success only in a social environment.”37 And this is how the novel intuitively understands the consciousness of people active to any extent in a social field. In this way, Firs allegorically maps a relationship between consciousness—Joanna, “done with the world” that is its environment—and society, the world in whose environment are many psychic systems. The allegory of Joanna as a psychic system depends on the figuration of referential specifics of the scene, an island far from land. Yet the very allegory that turns reference into figure (island into mind) signifies precisely the opposite of the inaccessibility of an island far from land, because the allegory is of a psychic system thoroughly interpenetrated with a social one. And so narrative and allegory are at once

37 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 265.
consonant and antithetical. By formalizing and observing the relationship between consciousness and the world, the novel is committed to articulating and surveying its own social vision. The tension inhering in this vision is that the novel cannot imagine or offer admittance to a world in which consciousness is isolated, for ideological reasons, as well as reasons of generic necessity—local color is about observing community and it has nothing to observe if there are not people interacting.

We have seen that in *Firs* a dialogic social form like the interview—itself a figure of reading and writing—is needed to actuate and make visible the formation and visibility of an interior. Yet here the same process happens in the opposite direction, outwardly directed toward the constitution of the interior of the interviewer. If the relationship between Joanna and the social environment figures the foundation of a psychic system, it is being redoubled at a second level and staged within the interviewing narrator. The interview is specular, happening nowhere but within imagination, as if her interiority hosted the spaces of both island and its environment. This specular interview, because it contains an allegory of the formation of a psychic system, is virtually a parable of interiority at the most developed level. Since it is a parable of the first-person narrator, it is broadcast from the most seemingly recognizable, empathic level. The narrator’s containment of the interiority figured by the interview works as a diagram of sentimental communication become alien, midway between an older tradition and the abstraction of persons so central to our turn-of-the-century works under discussion. For the narrator, then, the genesis of the person in the embedded narrative is the autogenesis of that narrator at a higher level. And, as we will see, this genesis looks like the reflexivity of a novel, which becomes mixed up in or overtakes the person altogether.
Following from this, we can turn to a later moment in the Joanna episode, when the narrator has the following revelation during her visit to Shell-heap island:

There was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong. (444)

The first thing to note is that our narrator here is articulating a rather eerie account of what reading literature “for an hour or a day” looks like, and the form of second-order observation it entails (“in the life of each of us, I said to myself,” “we understand our fellows”) as a techné of self-making. As Mark Seltzer writes, “The novel as genre from the start is concerned with showing readers how they might lead lives by showing how a life is something that can be led.”

Perhaps no surprise, then, that Joanna is at once a sort of public Crusoe—since Robinson Crusoe is the paradigmatic incidence of a novel about self-making that is read by self-makers. At the same time, she is a counter-Crusoe, miniaturized: “She was the same as ever, except I think she looked smaller,” Mrs. Todd says of seeing Joanna during her one visit to the island. “She never wanted the sheep after that first season… but the chickens done well”—chickens little, substituted for Crusoe’s goats (436, 442). Of course, because “There wasn’t no clock” on Shell-heap, there can be no Friday (437). In her renunciation of the world, Joanna certainly lacks fundamental qualities of Ian Watt’s Crusoe as the paradigmatic homo economicus, he whose “aim is never merely to maintain the status quo, but to transform it,” and economic individualism has little symbolic relevance for one voluntarily exiled to a tiny island that affords no possibility of material increase.

Despite the differences, a fundamental similarity between Crusoe and Joanna

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38 Seltzer, Official World, 121.

—reinforced by the situational and semantic allusiveness just mentioned—can be predicated on *Robinson Crusoe* as benchmark for the novel genre’s representation (and production) of interiorization. This stands whether we have Watt’s largely secularized individual or Michael McKeon’s Crusoe for whom “the metaphysical realm of the Spirit may become accommodated and rendered accessible as the psychological realm of Mind.”40 In *Crusoe*, “inside” narrative devices like an embedded diary and interior monologue combine with the literal and allegorical “outside” valences of his island to dialecticize the representation of interiority. A central twist in *Firs*, however, is that interiorization in the Joanna episode is exclusively, almost hyperbolically exteriorized on and as the island, which is both empty and only figures the scene of its own reading. In turn, *Firs’* modern version of *Crusoe* replays the formation of the interior. Yet it inverts the formation of the isolated interior into a vision of the formation of an evacuated self inseparable from its exterior. *Crusoe* is the paradigmatic novel of self-making, but in the Joanna and Shell-heap episode self-making is inseparable from self-unmaking. If Joanna, present only within an internal interview, is central to the generation of our narrator’s interiority, and the generation of *Pointed Firs* itself, that interiority in turn is only the effect of reading this revision of *Crusoe* about self-making as self-unmaking. Moreover, that interior is the revision. Additionally, the revised *Crusoe* is a reflexive figure for the novel to measure its distance from a novel like Defoe’s *Crusoe*. In that way, it views its own strange psychological technology, the indistinction of interiority as empty as Shell-heap island. What remains in the wake of the collapse of the distinctions between mind and world, self and other, and figure and reference, is the vast, impersonal formalism of the novel’s figurative system. It becomes visible to *Firs* as the landscape of the landscape of the world, the architecture of its architecture. *Firs* evacuates itself

of characters and consciousness as the correlative measures of meaning and experience, allegorizing their contingent construction and the contingent construction of their readers.

Nonetheless, we find an unyielding residual. The only remaining indices of Joanna’s material existence are things no different from the matter of the ancient earth (“poor Joanna’s house was gone except the stones of its foundations” (444)). Crucially, what at last remains as the substitute for the intact consciousness of the narrator, or consciousness as such, is nothing other than a materialization as and of the island—“the stones of its foundation”—distinctly material, hard, and inhuman. Consciousness is exteriorized in the world as a place in which one can dwell, but it is only a small radius of stone, like an inverted and alienated version of Bachelard’s phenomenology of the imagination.41 Here this means dwelling in a self that is a place without a self, a place that gives itself unto no poetic phenomenology whatsoever. What the novel really directs us to, as it collapses its concentric frames of interaction and interiors into a single axis, into a zero degree, is materiality itself—the precedent and perdurance of inorganic matter. And since that process is an aspect of the total system, it too contracts into what is at once its inner and outer limit—something irreducible, literal, dense. We turn out to be nothing but that empty island, as does the novel genre in this vision. This is not exactly the mind “materialized and abstracted…the place everyone is destined to share” as Bill Brown argues.42 Instead, the mind is understandable only within the context of reading and communication as, discomfitingly, nothing but this core material, with nowhere and nothing to share. This core material is not, I think, something like a sign of deep time or the inhuman matter that exists before and after us. Rather, it signals the visibility of the inhuman figuration of reference. As in Crane, it figures the


42 Brown, *Things*, 123.
utterly alien quality of the newly visible figuration of the world in turn of the century realisms as apprehended by those very realisms.

The novel’s rewriting of *Crusoe* is in and of itself a moment in literary history (as is any novel); the figured rewriting comes at a late moment in the narrative progression of a novel in part about the movement of time; and the content of the *Crusoe* rewriting indicates a shifting in the history of the realist novel. All three converge here as impetus. As in Crane, the moment of maximal alienation from an immediate humanistic realism reflexively doubles back on the vocation of literary realism. The stone that marks this convergence figures two further contradictory directions, in this way becoming a paradoxical and radiant figure. The empty, material island, as a sign of the massive alienation of the novel from a known humanism, is a dialectical restoration of that very loss, in a radical and suicidal form. The very inhuman materiality of the figure becomes an ideal convergence of signifier and referent, as the irreducible foundation of stone achieves a sort of posthuman reconciliation. This reconciliation epochally reverses the alienated language of the novel, back to a lifeworld and earthen ideal that recovers some phantom authenticity of an organic and inalienable matter. In turn, this is well beyond those contemporary Rooseveltian returns to strenuous activity, sports or boy scouting, or filibustering, and perhaps hearkens to a deeper, more disturbing strain of the search for organicity. In other words, the inhuman figural system becomes read as an image of the ideal. In the modernisms to come, we might find this moment in at least two forms—on the one hand, the sudden drive for a phenomenological immanence, a concern with the tactility of media and its materials, which in its most extreme form harbors involution and extinction. In later novels, this impulse is reversely figured by the exhaustion of a consciousness at odds with itself, the urging towards a merging with the self (or non-self)—whether those diffusing supra-egos of D.H.
Lawrence, Jean Rhys’s slides into terminal sleep, the emptying convergence of mind and
visuality in Cather, Wright’s reduction of a double-consciousness to the golden annularity of a
ring (its own foundation, forever), and, perhaps those later disappearances of Beckett, covert
local color journeying of semi-persons who yearn to be forever prostrate and immobile upon the
sward.

On the other side of the paradox, the stone, in its inhuman materiality, announces the
triumph of the figural system—as the inorganic sign of its constructivism, the transcendence of
an outmoded ideal of self-identity. Here we might find those artistic experiments in abstract
forms (cubism, Vorticism, etc), or fascinations with speed, the machinic, the supra-human. Nor
are these two opposed impulses necessarily particularly far apart. This paradox of the paradox is
signaled in the full phrase “the stones of its foundation,” which is at once a remainder—that
which exists when everything else is removed, like the fossil in the ground or the mind
disappearing into a last sleep—just as it is the beginning of a thing. A restructuring and
rebuilding under a new dispensation, as if the originary island of Crusoe, with its journals,
comfortably hewn home, goatfolds, and slaves, were now being built again, block by block and
unit by unit, without any Robinson Crusoe.

Future writers engage these dilemmas in ways unavailable to Firs, which seeks to
momentarily suspend it in the way most fitting for local color—a family reunion. Immediately
following this moment of material contraction are the chapters of the Bowden family reunion,
insistent on rhythm, routine, social form, and generation, a recuperation of order that binds a
regularity of language to a regularity of social form: “I began to respect the Bowdens for their
inheritance of good taste and skill and a certain pleasing gift of formality” (465). Here it all is,
the total recuperation, packed into one self-reflexive sentence. We have the figure of the
somewhat unhinged Sant Bowden, an elder relative with dashed military hopes who conducts the patterning of the family. He reorganizes them back into the units of a sentence patiently waiting their marshaling into coherence: “We were sorted out according to some clear design of his own, and stood as speechless as a troop to await his orders” (460). Even as it restores itself to order, the novel belies that as an inhuman or informational program. Here the social organization of Dunnet and the novel look belie social organization as a vehicle for a conspicuous parading of syntax, with a clear design, waiting for its reading or utterance. The novel can no longer separate mimesis from an observable formal patterning, a local syntax and geography of discourse.

8.

The final chapter of the novel is “The Backward View.” Here, the local color bildungs of the narrator comes to completion; the community has been mapped and recorded, and a momentary identification, even a momentary assimilation, of narrator to characters has been achieved— “I glanced at my friend’s face and saw a look that touched me to the heart,” “he looked up and answered my farewells with a solemn nod” (485). Except we have seen that the figural logic of the novel, and its reflexive inquiry, no longer exactly supports character. Instead “I saw a look” expresses the formal recursivity from which character emerges here, and in turn the “heart” within becomes separated from its normal tenor by way of the synesthetic metaphor that introduces it. This is why we can point to a bildungs and its simultaneous negation, and the course of the bildungs as the very negation of its preconditions. The Joanna episode was the end of one bildungs, and symbolically a destruction of the bildungs. The remainder of the novel is just that, a remainder, a quantity left over. At these very moments, the completion of this negative bildungs of the protagonist, something quite startling occurs.
As the narrator takes her leave of Dunnet Landing, at the near turning of autumn, departure from intimates is analogized as perspectival distance. From the deck of her outbound “small unpunctual steamer” (a miniature and temporally disjointed boat, of course—Dunnet to the last), she sees “Mrs. Todd herself, walking slowly in the footpath” (486). Pulling away at a perspectival level recurs in a very different pulling away—or, rather, a pulling apart—as character reference and structural self-reference cleave: as she looks back at Mrs. Todd, the narrator thinks of “the large, positive qualities that control a character” (486). This is not merely a benevolent determinism. More significantly, it is a certain compositional principle of the novel. In this way, natural history and novelistic construction pun on one another, and the novel conspicuously indicates, and so reifies, and so denaturalizes, its own constructive program. The novel does so precisely at the moment it is maximizing the very humanistic pathos we have previously seen evacuated and then recovered as the supervised coordination of group movement during the family reunion. The character system and character-spaces emerge into the visible rendering of their own operationality. This sudden supra-agency presences as a ground beyond all prior reversals of figure and ground. Sublating preceding inversions, it makes graphic the story of discourse by writing its writing in an immanent narrative present, as if condensing the historical time of Dunnet into a pure present, like some ghostly prevision of the modernisms that seek to achieve the same.

The narrator’s subsequent realization, still on the outward-bound boat, “so we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural ends,” is the moment at which she becomes the reader of the finished book she is (485). The absorption (or extroversion) of interior into world now dialectically overleaps itself into a supervening observational position. From this position, the observer observes the material mediality of the novel, thereby effecting
and presiding above an exploding of the boundary between our two temporal orders of the mimetic and the medial. The novel as object and the world it shapes becomes a composite and it sees itself as it dies—and, crucially, it sees itself after that, as if the finished book persists to observe from a space beyond it that it paradoxically contains.

The narrator finally sees Mrs. Todd “disappear[ed] again behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed Firs” (486). The arbitrary cut that marked the beginning, pointed firs, returns as a reflexive gesture of closure. What was underdetermined as a beginning is overdetermined as an ending, because symbolic structure begins to organize itself in this world from the outset. Hence the thoroughly literary symmetry of a beginning and an ending with an identical motif. But now the human world of Dunnet has disappeared, whereas at the beginning of the novel the same description of landscape heralded its emergence. And so we have a repetition of the origin scene, with all people disappeared behind a darkness. Like the paradox of the stones as a foundation, this is the actual rewriting of some new prototype, something beyond local color (and classic American realism or naturalism). Plot becomes the performance of watching form emerge without people. The same novel begins again, depopulated of character and narrator.

As the narrator’s boat steams away from Dunnet it crosses waters that belong to no known sea:

> The sea was full of life and spirit, the tops of the waves flew back as if they were winged like the gulls themselves, and like them had the freedom of the wind. Out in the main channel we passed as bent-shouldered old fisherman bound for the evening round among his lobster traps. (486)

Suddenly dismantled and self-exhibiting discourse begins to recreate itself. The waves revel in being form that can alter its form at will, and can even leave its hylomorphic bounds, accomplished here in three figurations of flight—flying waves to flying gulls to the wind itself, into the air, toward the horizon. These figurations are self reflexive in a sentence that takes off
from the ground and therefore does precisely what it describes. Consider this freeplay alongside the bent-shouldered old fisherman (the widower Elijah Tilley): the drudge of necessity figured as ossification of form, the bent-shouldered body as stiff and rigorous as the wooden trap which might as well contain the man who uses it. Here, then, is the old dialectic of freedom and necessity, modally reiterated as the distinction between genre and improvisation, local color and sheer contingency, literalism and the promise of an ecstatic complexity of language. Perhaps it is also something like the strange meeting of the dehumanized world with a creative principle, merging the depeopled aesthetic to itself, become promethean fabricator building anew with the ruins of a dying world and dying genre. In the rigor of its reflexivity, in the gap between its humanism and the cold grandeur of its world-building, the novel pulls away from the dialectic of freedom and necessity as a communal concern. At the end of The Country of the Pointed Firs, no empathy or sentimentalism can be found in a posterior vitalism that does not inhere in any representations of living matter. Sentences here do not figure waves—rather, waves figure sentences. This is then a narrator well beyond any Boothian model, with no face and no intention—no reliability or unreliability, because it just does what it does. Here we are seeing the fantastical effect of a discursive and historical moment of necessary misalignment. It is a moment that becomes more than adventitious, more than a momentary and chance mutation in generic dialectics, because it so startlingly emerges as a coherent eventuality in a novel that has exceeded its initial conditions of conceptualization and generic reflexivity. In rigorously differentiating itself and pursuing a totalizing world, in a loop of observing the world it makes and reacting to that, the novel comes upon a new world as the alienation of the old one—the very result of the autopoeisis of that old one. And the alien writing here is ecstatic, this pulling away from the old real, from the dying generic ground of local color, into the future. We might even
say that, per Lyotard’s counter-intuitive definition of the postmodern, this moment, “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself,” is doing just that, yet that unpresentable emerges from the inner momentum of its own form.43 Here is the final sentence:

Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight. (487)

As in Crane’s work, and Melville’s and Poe’s before that, the sea is that space where the landed encounters its transformation or negation into sheer otherness. That outer limit of speculative observation we saw in our discussion of Littlepage, that place where only the figments of unknown beings were, is here occupied and from there the observing world looks back at its own genre and its own place—“and when I looked back again.” A looking back across an ever increasing distance between the observational position and the genre, here is a moment of pure self-difference, well beyond the self-difference engendered by the gold standard. The point is not what the observer sees, which is dying local color and a transforming realism, but where it sees from, which is from the unspecified and purely positional space of a stylistic dispensation occupied prior to its historical realization. This is the place from which the novel persists after its death, for a little while, to look back at itself from the future. In other words, the compositer which appears after the human collapse, which composes and sees itself after, is always posterior. This backwards view returns to the temporal paradox encoded in local color that we began with—a new old and an old new—literally extended on either side to its polarized limits.

The relationship between the posterior compositor and the novel is a typological one, made immanent. A coruscating instance of the present is seen as past by the future within the present, constellated within the same figure, at once distended yet formalized as an immanent parallax of time itself. And the typological here gives way unto something like the anagogical. This is an exchange of glances—“I…saw a look”—between past worlds and worlds to come. Ultimately, the blank space of observation persisting beyond the novel, looking back at the novel, renders local color and realism as type of the antitype of literary modernism. And so a letter cast into the arctic distance returns to sender as a different letter, on the original paper, in the same hand. The novel completes itself by unraveling itself and there stylistically predicts, and performs, literatures to come by virtue of what seems like a narrative act purely in advance of its historical occurrence. The ghostly and presiding compositor here, in some seemingly immanent phenomenological moment, is itself the collapse of an expansive social vision of realism. That compositor is the image of narratological stream of consciousness as the very formal sign of the individual uprooted from the communal bonds so important to the genre. Here the novel proleptically extends the very literary genealogy it has encoded. At the last, it adds a subsequent phase to the Darwinian moment it previously figured as the present order of naturalism. The future is necessarily ushered in as inhuman, as a formal future, in which the subject is in perpetual crisis, within the world that writes it.

The only way to reconcile this account with the notion of a human narrator is to assume some “metafictional” trick in which the narrator herself, or an author figure (read: Jewett), now enters into her fiction through the sleight of hand of metalepsis and foregrounds her own writing as the true content of the novel. This squares with our account of the kunstler, and we might just offer an institutional reading in which Jewett is performing her own distinction. But our narrator
has already been figured as a writer, all along, and so the sudden fissioning of a double at a higher narrative level makes little sense. Moreover, an authorial arrogation of the proxy of oneself would be a moment of de facto suicide, the “devastation of being” that for Leo Bersani is the “total inversion of the world by interpretive fantasy,” by seeing the world as the self, even if that world already contains a narrator-proxy of the self. Should we accept the künstler view despite this, we encounter a further problem: the libidinized contours of a psyche, posited as a supervening force, would simply be undone by the machinery that we have already seen generate the representation of consciousness as an effect of its own figural system.

In modernisms to come, what is so new and stunning to Crane and Jewett becomes conventionalized as technique. By then it is known territory, as we will see in the next chapter. In her earlier moment, Jewett is writing dispatches to us from an alien country, and in doing so she is helping to write it into being. I take *The Country of the Pointed Firs*’ great, even baffling, achievement to be the construction of the life and death of a world, which instances and allegorizes the life and death of many worlds, small and vast, actual and possible. We might think of the novel as both an anthropology and a speculative fiction. It is a documentary and fantasy of the effects of a world that is functionally differentiating, splitting off into more and more systems, and everywhere becoming newly visible to itself, sometimes in guises that are startling or unrecognizable. *Firs* both encodes and observes the gradual denaturing of its own classical-realist premises, which cannot abide the drawing into equivalence of character, interiority, and interpersonal communication with the inhuman formalism of systems. The novel acts out, allegorizes, and observes its own historical supercession, a self-estrangement still self-

contained. In the end, as the novel supplants itself, that alien country suddenly seems to be writing itself.

9.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* takes you in, as well. The last sentence, once again:

*Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight.* (487)

At the last, the novel converges its vision and the immanent visioning that is reading. The reader herself is incorporated through a sort of ontological sleight of hand, or sleight of vision, as the case may be. As the boat moves toward the horizon that the novel had earlier indicated as the margin of finitude, but which we have seen is not that exactly, the sentence moves from a collective “we” to an individual “I,” as if to pronominally signify the derealization of community and the return to the atomized self of the reader, of anyone, just as it signifies the formation of the “I” as reciprocal with the “we.” In this same sentence, however, as the “I” looks back, it too disappears. What replaces the “I” is the impersonalized reification of sight without a character who sees—“lost to sight.” Only sight remains, detached from a seer. What sight is also doing is seeing everyone no longer seeing. You, then, are the one who remains to see sight seeing everyone no longer seeing, yourself now positioned in some sheer speculative space, over and above those the novel has ceaselessly generated. The novel ends, and then briefly remains, and in that instantaneous flash you see that at some point something in the future will remain to see you no longer seeing, as you, like all other worlds, become at the last forever anterior to what will come after you.
Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* was published in 1925, a quarter-century after Crane’s death and Jewett’s effective retirement from writing. This was a banner year for American modernism—the year of *The Great Gatsby*, *In Our Time*, and *Manhattan Transfer*. Cather has been variously characterized as a realist, a modernist, a realist with modernist tendencies, and vice versa. *The Professor’s House*, however, will provide its own self-descriptions, and will in large part be about those self-descriptions. The novel is centered around the very institutions in which terms like realism and modernism are generated and circulated—universities, academic conferences, cultural institutions like museums. Yet the terms of its own self-description, which derive from a 1923 manifesto, “The Novel Demeublé,” are quite different, and ultimately far stranger. *The Professor’s House* makes clear that by 1925 we have arrived at a moment when what looks like a realist novel cannot not include its own self-description. What is particularly striking about Cather’s novel is that it contains multiple and competing—and lethally competing—programmatic self-descriptions. The novel builds itself by generating multiple allegories of itself within itself—an ideal version of itself, the Demeublé, a degraded version, Literalism, and another, stranger mode, what we can call an inhuman novel. These play out a self-reflexive, allegorical struggle for the *The Professor’s House* as a type of novel, and for the types of institutions and institutionalized worlds that Cather’s novel cross-references. For *The Professor’s House*, being itself proves to be intolerable—compulsively self-
reflexive, semiotically schizoid, and contorted between a world of mimesis and a world of allegory. Since the novel genre is a human form, as odd and obvious as that might sound—a social form that depicts social organization—the forms extrinsic to human beings, human institutions, and human novels would be inhuman ones. As The Professor’s House grows exhausted with the novel genre, and the human world it associates with the novel genre, it shifts towards the allegory of its own extinction as a literary realism, or as any other official generic classification we wish to give it. The novel allows us to mark an important point in the formal and conceptual trajectory of the American novel: the point at which the novel becomes exhausted with the compulsory professing of itself, and the point at which it seeks to find an outside to its official self, or, barring that, to extinguish itself. Yet it ends up back in its own house, in its own office, again and again. Although, as we will see, some offices of realism are less human than others.

1.

Willa Cather’s most important artistic statement was “The Novel Déméublé,” a manifesto first published in the April, 1922 issue of The New Republic and later reprinted in Cather’s essay collection On Writing. The manifesto diagnoses some of the problems with the state of the modern novel. Cather’s 1925 The Professor’s House will subsequently take up and contend with these problems—virtually encoding (or transcoding) the terms of the manifesto—which will mean contending with itself as a modern novel. I want to set out the way in which the manifesto itself becomes contested ground for the very contestants it describes.
In the manifesto, Cather describes two types of realist literature—one an ideal type that she terms the “Novel Démeublé,” which translates from the French as “the unfurnished novel,” and its antithesis, the bad mode of “literalism” (I will subsequently capitalize “literalism” for the sake of clarity). Each type is at once a style of novel and an aesthetic ideology. More expansively, each figures a vision of the production of both novels and selves, forms of art and forms of social organization. Each mode stands for a type of writing and the type of world recursively bound up with that writing. In that sense, Literalism and the Démeublé are types of writing and allegorical signs for the components of a world.

The manifesto begins “The novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished. The property-man has been so busy on its pages, the importance of material objects and their vivid presentation have been so stressed…” This cluttered realism is Literalism, a debased mode consisting in “the cataloguing of a great number of material objects, in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations” (37). This is a novel that keeps a detailed record of itself. Balzac and D.H. Lawrence its two exemplars, Literalism is a type of novel for people “who want change,—a succession of new things that are quickly threadbare and can be lightly thrown away” (36). The temporality of the Literalist novel is that of the commodity form, and so the novel encodes the looming effacement of its indexical references: Cather cites Stevenson’s remark that he wanted to “blue-line” a great deal of Balzac’s presentations,” because those presentations now referenced outmoded things (39). The overfurnished novel becomes unfurnished in time, a cadaverous Démeublé, stuffed with material that is literally unseeable: “their material

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surroundings, upon which he expended such labor and pains…the eye glides over them” (39).

The inorganic and the organic in Literalism are scarcely differentiable, and they merge into a general field of self-consuming, expiring matter—of Lawrence, Cather writes that “a novel crowded with physical sensations is no less a catalogue than one crowded with furniture” (42). Despite this tendency to efface themselves, the voided signs remain as gross materiality, in part because of that voiding: “In reproducing the houses, the upholstery, the food,” literalist novelists merely produce so much “red meat thrown into the scale” (38). With “the gaudy fingers of the showman,” they render “the behavior of the bodily organs under stimuli” as “mere animal pulp” (41, 42, 42). The type of people who want Literalist novels—who want change, novelty, a sweaty grasping of the commodity form—are structured like Literalist novels. In turn, those novels are structured like Literalist people, because they are themselves anatomies—the guts of the book, like the guts of the person, are short-lived “mere animal pulp” that remain on the page like so much carrion. This feedback loop of partial people and partial novels makes up a type of world—a bleak one, characterized by a bleak systematicity that constantly expires and constantly renews itself, leaving a cadaverous, blank accumulation of signs, commodities, and aesthetic forms behind it.

Against this Cather positions “the novel Démeublé”, which is a novel that makes distinctions and then de-temporalizes what it selects: “Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art” (40). “It” now has the capacity to make its own selections because the artist has ceded her labors to the novel’s own physis and techné: “The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a
higher and truer effect” (40). That autogenesis is then redoubled within the artwork: with respect to Hawthorne, Cather writes that “[w]hatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed…” (41-2) In other words, from what is named the novel then generates a further order of meaning that transcends the very materiality of its naming in writing, operating at a level higher than the grammar and semantics of the novel, existing in an upper space outside of time and materiality. This unfolds at two removes from the artist, but it makes a community of those artists who are capable of producing and appreciating such works, and their community is modeled on that very artwork. As the negative image of Literalism (at the center of which was the paradox of the material becoming negative) here the negative becomes positive as the paradox of an artwork and community outside of the productive and social forms of modernity. This community stands outside of the time of the commodity, stands outside the pulpy prison-house of the body, stands outside of Literalism.

The opposition between the Démeublé and Literalism does not mark some historical decline from the former to the latter, because the historical examples of each type run roughly parallel. They are contemporary alternatives. And this presents a problem for the Démeublé. Literalism and the Démeublé are described as recursive loops of persons, modes of production, and aesthetic forms—the novel as a small, self-making world, which at once stands in for the type of world outside of it but is also a part of that world. Highly formal, hyper-compressed, and highly abstract, these two ways of thinking about the artwork indicate that such abstractions have become standard, even for a realist like Cather who is writing a manifesto that critiques
reification. In this respect, the irony is that the Démeublé can only use a language symptomatic of Literalism to describe itself, a language of self-description, reduction, abstraction, and programmatic allegory. There is a homology between the Démeublé and Literalism. The other problem is that the Démeublé, like the novel within the literary system, appears in an organ that is itself of the world of Literalism—here The New Republic, a mass publication within the marketplace. Cather, who had gained fame and wealth by the time of this essay, had herself been a magazine editor, first at the Pittsburg-based Home Monthly during 1896-7, and then at the far more prestigious New York City-based Mc Clure’s, where she worked for eight years beginning in 1906. The vision of the Démeublé, then, can only be articulated and received within the same institutional context from which it seeks to extricate itself. For this reason, the description of the Démeublé in the manifesto articulates a program for the very manifesto “The Novel Démeublé.” Like the Démeublé, the manifesto would remove itself from the institution that renders it available and legible as a part of communication within the literary system—and so remove itself from its own narrative. If for Marjorie Perloff, in Marinetti’s and Luigi Russolo’s Futurist manifestos “the theory…is the practice,” here that holds true, but it also suffers from the distance between a program and its realization.²

What the manifesto makes clear is that the ways of describing and theorizing types of life and types of art now look like a certain codification, and normalization, of the uncanny figural likenesses and acts of self-reference we saw appear in Crane and Jewett, who were stunned by them. The uncanny is now the everyday, and this uncanny is also the condition of

institutionalized self-description, a regularized likeness. This is not exactly a happy development for novels like Cather’s.

The manifesto ends with a wish:

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, and the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of the Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little—for the nursery tale, no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude. The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls. (42-3)

Here is a recognizable architecture, a room in a house, become a stage, become the scene of a miracle, become the body of a man. It is as if the manifesto form of “The Novel Demeublé,” which is a professing about art, could by operationalizing the precepts it sets out turn itself into art, and free itself from its imprisonment in precisely what it critiques. In doing so, it would become like a Novel Demeublé. The house, which contains the drama, becomes at once a figure for the ideal novel, a figure for the artist, and a figure for the institution in which the house is housed. Novel, institution, and artist each stand in for the others, as if the fate of one would define the fate of the remaining two: “a man needed one passion, and four walls.” Together, they are the walls of a world.

The metaphor resolves the dilemma, but there is also something very strange about it, a sort of alien anthropological vision. Seen in a half-light, the conceit is setting out an ideal of persons, institutions, and aesthetic forms converged—full of presence but emptied of social content, even emptied of persons. Here, then, is a brief vision of a third type of novel surfacing, one latent within the Demeublé, and one that emerges from within it as it fails—and one that
seems inhuman. This glimpse of a third type of novel will resurface in a far more visible form, and figure centrally, in *The Professor's House*, which encounters structural dilemmas quite similar to those of “The Novel Démeublé.”

2.

*The Professor's House* was published two years after “The Novel Démeublé,” in 1925, and followed Cather’s 1923 novel *A Lost Lady*. What marks *The Professor's House* as unprecedented in Cather’s previous writing is its setting—the urban/suburban world of industrial modernity—and its singular narrative structure. Cather wrote relatively little in her letters and essays about *The Professor's House*, calling it “a nasty, grim little tale” (which is presumably not her juridical measure of the novel).³ She also called it “the first book I’ve written with any irony in it.”⁴ Its title refers to the longtime house of the St. Peters—Godfrey and Elizabeth, and their two adult daughters, Rosamond and Kathleen, who now live with their respective husbands, Louie Marsellus and Scott McGregor. The book begins with Godfrey St. Peter, a professor of Spanish history at Hamilton University, loathe to move from the old house after he and his wife buy a luxurious new house. This house is paid for by a lucrative academic prize awarded him for a multi-volume history *Spanish Adventures in North America*. Godfrey lives in the new house, but works in his attic office in the old, and still keeps a large garden there. The modern world of the novel is one of institutional and financial wrangling, officialdom, instrumentalization, and the


⁴ Ibid., 185.
social machinations of the upwardly mobile—peripheral, if potent, forces in Cather’s previous works, now the vascular system of the present.

The novel, presumably set around 1924 (the year Cather began writing it), is divided into three “books.” The first and third books, set in the diegetic present, told in the third-person, are situated in the university town of Hamilton, on Lake Michigan (the state is unspecified). There, Godfrey St. Peter is drifting away from what the novel calls “the human family”—he is undergoing a growing psychical and affective detachment from his family and profession. He spends a good deal of time thinking about his protégé and close friend, the much younger Tom Outland, who was a brilliant inventor and his daughter Rosamond’s former fiancée, and who died in 1915 in the First World War. The second book, written in a very different mode, generically as well as narratologically—a fantastical blend of naturalism and the Western genre, told in the first person—takes place in New Mexico, roughly a decade prior to the diegetic present. This is the story of the discovery of an ancient Anasazi cliff city, as told by Tom Outland.

I want to track here how what looks like a realist novel is also a self-reflexive allegory. Indeed, it is almost like some archaic allegorical quest-narrative, one about a novel that tries to escape from the prison-house of reflexive modernity and its social forms. And it also tries to do what it allegorizes, to be a novel that has escaped. Yet *The Professor’s House*, in its own relentless reflexivity, keeps on observing that it is precisely back in the place it wanted to escape from—just an allegory of trying to turn an allegory about freeing itself from reflexivity into a formal reality. This will be a more general problem of self-description—the compulsion for persons and artworks to do it, and the agonies of all efforts to coincide with a self-description
merely producing further self-descriptions. This is the problem of being an allegory of oneself—
whether a person, an institution, an artwork—and the problem of the world the novel discovers it
is both within and working to generate.

The Professor’s House is a novel at the spatial and thematic center of which is a
university, Hamilton University. It is also a novel that is filled with knowledge workers—
historians, anthropologists, physicists, curators. Godfrey St. Peter has spent his entire career at
Hamilton University, which has in effect built the narrative structure and diegetic infrastructure
of the present. St. Peter’s newfound wealth comes from an academic prize. His daughter
Rosamond and her husband Louie’s fortune comes from their ownership of the patent for an
invention Tom Outland made at Hamilton University, a “process” which is “revolutionizing
aviation” (30). Spatially, Hamilton University dictates movements in much of the novel—
professional engagements, teaching days, vacations. The university is part of the sensory horizon
of the novel, as well—it underlies the vista seen from the one window in St. Peter’s cherished
study in his old house, and nature itself seems subordinate to its architectural presence—“He
rose quickly and went to his one window, opened it wider, and stood looking at the dark clump of
pine-trees that told where the Physics building stood” (74).

Cather herself had been an extremely gifted student at the University of Nebraska, and
had taught high-school in her early twenties, and years later taught one exhausting summer
session at the Bread Loaf writers conference. During her career as a novelist she had little
formal connection to universities, although she maintained friendships with several professors,
and received numerous honorary degrees. Her letters provide relatively little material about her attitudes towards issues concerning the politics of higher education or questions of educational policy and administration. However, in 1939, in a letter to Norman Foerster, who two years previously had written *The American State University, Its Relation to Democracy*, Cather wrote that she wanted “to thank you for the book I have always wanted to write myself; your book on the few uses and many abuses of the State University. They really threaten the soundness of our citizenship. It's alarming.” Except Cather had written about this, fifteen years prior: *The Professor’s House*. The institution so central to this novel is one whose future is in grave doubt. Hamilton University is moving away from a liberal arts model, a shift in institutional philosophy that is anathema to St. Peter — “The State Legislature and the board of regents seemed determined to make a trade school of the university” (120). He condemns “the new commercialization, the aim to “show results” that was undermining and vulgarizing

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5 Cather’s cousin was a professor of mathematics at Columbian College (now George Washington University), and she visited him in early May of 1898. At the University of Nebraska, she had warm relations with her professors—her freshman year professor sent an essay of hers on Caryle to a Boston-based literary magazine, which published it in May of 1892. At Nebraska, she was also friends with the Canfields, including James Canfield, the chancellor of the university, and later the president of Ohio State University and librarian of Columbia University. Her biographer James Woodress writes that while teaching in Pittsburg “[h]er natural talents no doubt caused resentment and jealousy, as did her ability to abide fools. One teacher who followed Cather some years after she had resigned recalled that bitter feelings still existed among faculty members.” She found Bread Loaf “exhausting and never again was tempted.” See James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 154, 322.

6 Willa Cather to Norman Foerster, 13 February, 1939, excerpted, The Complete Letters of Willa Cather, https://cather.unl.edu/letters

We should note that Cather is writing before the onswep of progressive education. Ruggs’ *The Child-Centered School*, for instance, is first published in 1928. Mark McGurl writes that “[r]esponsive to a growing concern that institutions, left to their own devices, make for problematically “institutional subjectivities,” progressive educators worked to re-gear U.S. schools for the systematic production of original persons—more than a few of whom would actually become the most celebrated form of the self-expressive individual, the writer.” Again, Cather’s allegorical quality reflects such debates in general terms but subordinates them to a broader moral vision and encounter with socio-semiotic problems. See McGurl, *Program Era*, 83.
education” (120). And this is what “threaten[s] the soundness of a citizenship,” and of an aesthetic formation like the novel. St. Peter and his old friend Dr. Crane, who once worked alongside Tom Outland, are “the only two men on the faculty who were doing research work of an uncommercial nature” (121). St. Peter is an aesthete, an upholder of high culture as a bulwark against an encroaching philistinism and instrumentalization: “Science hasn’t given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand” (55). His is a secular theology of art: “With the theologians came the cathedral-builders; the sculptors and glass-workers and painters. They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven” (56).

For Cather, as we know from “The Novel Démeublé,” and through the allegorical figure of St. Peter, the right sort of novel models the type of selves that allow the institution to thrive as a place that furthers the values of that sort of novel. The university teaches the values of writing novels, and novels teach us how to make proper institutions in a world now structured around them. Hamilton University becomes a self-reflexive figure for the novel The Professor’s House, and for the novel genre writ large—as if, depending on whether it succumbs to Literalism or affirms the Démeublé, the production of novels and the world the novel indexes will go the way it goes. By the same token, the way the novel goes will be the way the institution goes. The Professor’s House, then, like the manifesto, is a contest between these two types of a novel—and little models of a world. Literalism and the Démeublé, as allegorical figures of a type of novel and world, appear in the novel as two types of discrete, bounded, and highly figural space. The Professor’s old house and his movements and practices more generally figure the Démeublé (a
celestial city). The other houses and spaces where family and colleagues engage in social and professional affairs figure Literalism (a slough of despair). The seam (or path) between the two worlds of Literalism and the Démeublé, through which St. Peter must daily pass, is what the novel calls “that perilous journey down through the human house” (18). The novel *The Professor’s House* is what houses this antithetical pair of allegories of types of novel and types of world—each of which is constructing and competing for the novel *The Professor’s House*.

As if explicitly invoking “The Novel Démeublé,” the novel opens by declaring the realization of that manifesto’s governing exhortation: “The moving was over and done” (3). If “the moving was over and done” has a stabler reference, it is a figural one: Godfrey St. Peter’s inverse movement away from social relations and the types of novel that are crowded with them. He is presently dropping out of that family—from family, colleagues, associations—into social aloofness. This isolation is given topological shape by his isolation in the attic study of his old house. In that old house, object matter of a specific sort is prominent: “needless inconveniences,” fixtures and features like its “slanting floor,” “sagging steps,” and “creaky boards” (3). These are the fixtures of the house become art objects, of no instrumental value—the inverse features of a vulgar social and economic world. Objects for St. Peter are not important for what they will become, or how they will accumulate alongside other objects, but for what they are and the course that made them what they are—and what they are in their best light is that course. St. Peter experiences these objects as structures of temporal experience, of the sort one might have in the non-commercial novel. This circularity, this weaving of past and future, is in marked contrast to the grinding accumulations of Literalism, and the rapid obsolescing of its rhetoric and
the people structured by such rhetoric. St. Peter is a professor of history, and his house is its own little historical text given architectural form as a dwelling, like the binding of a novel.

No surprise, then, that the Professor’s gardening—he is a committed gardener—is a domesticated, reiterable praxis: “The Professor had succeeded in making a French garden in Hamilton…There were trees of course; a spreading horse-chestnut, a row of slender Lombardy poplars at the back, along the white wall, and in the middle of two symmetrical, round-topped linden-trees” (6). This practice and pattern of life is the antithesis of an exchangeable, ephemeral type of writing and type of life: “I dislike floridity when it is beaten up to cover the lack of something, to take the place of something” (37). Those sorts of artificial flowers take the place of the real ones, which require time and patience to grow (like the time and patience required to write *The Professor’s House*), and the cultivation of which is a practice that one can learn and teach. For St. Peter both the autopoeisis of the type of novel and world he figures, and the communication of it to others who might enter into it, are dependent on a high cultural practice and its pedagogy.

The Literalist world that St. Peter finds himself repulsed from—the world of “the human family,” a little less than kind—is one that cannot stop building itself. As Louie Marsellus, Rosamond St. Peter’s husband says, with reference to the luxury home he is building, “Building is the word with us” (28). It is a world that, from new houses built on new wealth to new commercial research initiatives to new circulations of old experience, cannot stop its own frenzied construction. As Stuart Burrows writes, the novel “might be said to turn in upon itself,
to make itself out of itself.” At the physiognomic and even ontological level, persons here are almost-persons: the body is never seen in its totality, like that of St. Peter’s eldest daughter, Rosamond—“Most people saw only Rosamond’s face” (26). Her husband Louie is still in compositional progress—his eyes are “visibly blue but the rest of his face” has “little color” (32). Unlike St. Peter, these people cannot be represented within or as art—they are without art. For instance, his younger daughter, Kathleen, who paints portraits, “can’t really do anyone but papa” (52). In place of such representational integrity is an attenuated graphemic status, a punctuation mark that adds exclamatory emphasis to a statement about a lack of content: Kathleen’s “slender, undeveloped figure…in profile…just like an exclamation point” (27). These built and building people, those closest to St. Peter—his wife, children, and their spouses—encode their own partiality, and their reliance on a compulsive reproduction, like the profit-driven university. And they keep on noticing it and talking about it.

This compositional precariousness is realized at a different order in a palpable uncertainty as to the integrity of identity and role—St. Peter’s daughter Kathleen says of her sister that “she’s entirely changed. She’s become Louie” (71). In a punning jest, Louie tells Rosamond she is “virtually [Outland’s] widow”—she is almost the thing she is, and the thing she almost is is an almost (30). In response to these symptoms of virtuality, characters offer one another reassurances, as when Scott, Kathleen’s husband, reassures his wife by saying “You know you are the real one, don’t you?” (93). But even efforts at comforting lead to a compulsive, self-reflexive reinforcement of the rhetorical and ontological instability of these characters—“Now what the hell is a virtual widow? Does he mean a virtuous widow, or the reverseous? Bang,

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bang!” (34). These are people of swift reversals and repetitions (an exclamation point is a bang), equivalences of syntax and being, running along the temporality of the newspaper press.

Literalist writing is the type of writing internal to this Literalist world: Scott fantasizes about producing real poetry, but is forced to produce tawdry copy—“it’s the daily prose poem I do for the syndicate, for which I get twenty-five beans” (33). The daily poem is the poem as daily news. These Literalist poems themselves reference the type of people in Literalism—their little Literalist poems—and so they must continuously reproduce themselves. Thus the reproduction of the same people, reproduced again and again: “Her nature was intense and positive; it was like a chiseled surface, a die, a stamp upon which he could not be beaten out any longer” (250).

In 1921, during a talk at the Fine Arts Society in Lincoln, Nebraska, entitled “Standardization and Art,” Cather said that “[e]verybody is afraid of not being standard…art cannot live in an atmosphere of manufactured cheer.”8 Here are the manufactured atmospherics of the hack professional, the profit-driven university, and a novel that is the body of its own decay—a Literalist novel about Literalism, filled with uncanny puns, self-reflexive grammar, bad poems, characters who are like convulsing or broken sentences. St. Peter, in turn, is like a man at once reading a Literalist novel and, while distinct from it, finding himself unhappily bound up within. It is a place for neither a humanistic professor and the novels he would read nor the humanistic author and the novels she would write.

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8 Quoted in Woodress, Willa Cather, 320.
Part of what is so uncanny about Cather’s novel is its coupling of literary-realist conventions with an allegorical mode that is almost archaic in the clear typology of its allegorical figures—its people, its places. In order to play out the fate of the novel genre, *The Professor’s House* seems to be channeling one of the very narrative modes from which the modern novel derives. Consider the allegorical clarity of the novel’s moral valuations of the Démeublé and Literalism, and the worlds they stand in for—the heroic “cathedral builders” of secular art and high culture, set against those manufactured, mass people each of which is like a “stamp upon which he could not be beaten out any longer.” Or consider the symbolic directness of naming Godfrey St. Peter after the apostle Peter, founder of another enduring church. The moral intent of the allegory is not parodic or ironic—for Cather the stakes of the contest are high. Hamilton itself is almost microcosmic as an allegorical location, as if it might stand in for the world—Hamilton in lieu of any White Rose. The very fact that it might do so speaks to the remapping of how one might even imagine a microcosm in the third decade of the twentieth century. For Cather, any possible world has the institution running through its center, and so the institution has become a central type in an allegorical lexicon for mapping secular experience. Yet the allegory the novel offers is no longer a linear journey, nor does it lend itself to ordered, stable levels of allegoresis—the novel is the second-order observer of allegorical self-descriptions, with which it cannot coincide. It resurrects almost graphically Paul de Man’s comments about the “truly temporal predicament” of allegory, which here takes on a coloring unique to second-order observation and the constitutive gap between seeing ourselves and being ourselves.9 If the very observational position of the novel is in this respect a still further level of allegory, then that

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9 See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 118.
allegorizes (and, at further orders of observation, allegorizes again and again) a general condition, and predicament, of reflexivity. In this respect, the organization of the novel is like a person, or a manifesto, or a university, or a corporation, all providing self-descriptions that they can produce, and observe, and enter into to themselves as part of a feedback loop. But they can never coincide with their self-description—whatever that might look like in actuality. What St. Peter stands in for from the most despairing perspective is just his standing in for something. In this respect, the novel encounters its unwanted allegory and, as we will see, seems fully aware of it—and profoundly, lethally unhappy with that. The novel—and so St. Peter—becomes symptomatic of precisely what it does not wish to be, even if it cannot be a novel without that (which is what it might not wish to be). In a way that perhaps most novels if not all novels are in the end, The Professor’s House is distinctly realist, insofar as it visibly encodes and visibly reflects upon its institutional conditions and the contradictions that ensue from them, which are themselves the general conditions of novels, their writers, and their readers in the world.

4.

Tom Outland, St. Peter’s prized pupil and his daughter Rosamond’s former fiancé, is dead in the diegetic present—killed on the Western Front in 1915—but he permeates the present nonetheless. He is surely one of the strangest figures in realist or modernist American literature—a “preposterous” character, as Guy Reynolds calls him.10 As a character and figure in the first

10 Reynolds also writes that “Outland exemplifies…thickened, layered, and knotted discourse. He is too complex for the transparencies of conventional character analysis.” Reynolds here is speaking less of Outland’s multiform, multipurpose presence, and more of the cultural signifiers he bears in him (i.e. inventor, wilderness, west, technologist, Spanish, Latin, etc.) See Guy Reynolds, Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), 126.
book, he is indeed preposterous—but he is Preposterous. In her brief essay “On The Professor’s House,” Cather makes reference to the “fine disregard of trivialities…in Tom’s face and in his behavior,” which clears out the novel’s “overcrowded” first part.\(^{11}\) Outland represents the uncrowded land and uncrowded mind—a young cowboy, off the open range, fantastically wandering into Hamilton and the lives of the St Peters’. And yet the uncrowded Outland is an extraordinarily crowded trope—the most crowded of all in the first book. His entrance into Hamilton is like the landing of a flying saucer: “[St. Peter] was working in his garden one Saturday morning, when a young man in a heavy winter suit and a Stetson hat, carrying a grey canvas telescope, came in at the green door that led from the street” (164). The sudden, almost surreal entrance of a man from another genre—with his Stetson hat, carrying a type of suitcase the name of which puns on an instrument of vision—signifies the promise of another way of seeing, a newfound capacity of the eye in a world of limited vision, instantly corroborated by the seemingly extraneous mention that the door is green. As Judith Butler notes, his “last name substitutes a trope of exile and excess at the site where a patronymic token of social cohesion might be expected.”\(^{12}\) Tom is outside the genealogical economy of the world, as well, and virtually outside of human biology—as Kathleen says, “Tom hasn’t any birthday” (104), and, as if in some ascription of psychic virginity, “fellows like Outland don’t carry much luggage’ (103).

During his first dinner with the St. Peters’, he wears a suit whose “shoulders…were so preposterously padded that the upper part of him seemed shut up in a case” (95). The pun seems obvious: he doesn’t fit here. Later that evening, as he walks up the stairs, site of so much


difficulty and resistance in the novel, his “heavy new shoes shot out from under him, and he sat
down on the edge of his spine with a thump” (99). At dinner, as if made of matter incompatible
with the stuff of the world, “his stiff white collar began to melt” (100). He carries a suitcase
“strangely light for its bulk,” and within it are remnants from another world, aural specimens as
out of place as he: “an earthen water jar, shaped like those common in Greek sculpture, and
ornamented with a geometrical pattern in black and white,” and “two lumps of soft blue stone,
the colour of robbins’ eggs, or of the sea on halcyon days of summer” (99, 101, 102). Keats’s urn
ornamented as paper and ink (black and white) and stones that fly and float, these are
synecdoches of the fantastical Cliff City of the second book and the type of novel that second
book will seek to be, as we will see. Already, then, Outland is something of a tropic magic act,
incorporating an entire array of representational tricks—in “his strange coming, his strange story,
his early death and posthumous fame—it was all fantastic” (233). He comes from an
incompatible ontological and semiotic field, somewhere outside of the Literalism/Démeublé
divide, and he distorts upon contact with this novel alien to him.

Such characterological confusion goes hand in hand with a semiotic confusion. The name
“Outland” is a referential array, a virtual economy of sponsored objects. Among the networks of
his relations in life and death, he is “the principle of the Outland vacuum…that is revolutionizing
aviation”—the unspecified technical discovery bearing his name (30). He is also the practical
application of his discovery, which has made Rosamond St. Peter, Outland’s former fiancee, and
her husband Louie Marsellus, very rich. Because of the spoils of this invention, in death he has
unwittingly purchased the luxury residence he has become, called “Outland,” where a visitor
“will find his books and instruments” (144). Characters keep relics of Outland that are
consubstantial with him, objects that blur the boundaries between the biological and the
inanimate, and object and person: Kathleen remarks that Outland’s blanket, now kept by St.
Peter, “was like [Outland’s] skin” (111). Outland is an occasion for the compulsive wordplay that
marks literalist characters—like Scott’s outburst “Outland, outlandish,” or jokes that seem
tongue-in-cheek bits of novelistic self-reference (here concerning the extraordinary tropic utility
of Tom), “We had poor Tom served up again,” or “[Tom] was not altogether straightforward; but
that was merely because he was not altogether consistent” (33, 94, 151).

What is easy to miss about the character (or pseudo-character) of Outland in the first
book is his fraught symbiosis with Hamilton University. They are equally productive of the
material and psychological infrastructure of the first book, and they tie into virtually every facet
of its plot. Yet they are also antitheses—Outland, the image of an outside, and Hamilton, which
anchors the world of convention. Yet Outland is also the model institutional citizen—“Outland
was, of course, the most brilliant pupil I ever had,”’ recalls his former physics professor Dr.
Crane (128). The entry of Outland, the emissary of the outside, into Hamilton, the nucleus of the
inside, figures what David Wellberry calls “discursive freshening”—a metaphor appropriate for
someone come in from the open vastness of Cather’s American West—which is a system’s
“dependence upon a constant regeneration of surprise” in order to forestall entropy.13 In this way,
Outland-inside also allegorizes the autopoeisis of the institution of the university, just as it
allegorizes—and instances—the very autopoeisis of the novel The Professor’s House. The irony
and the tragedy is that the university, and the novel, cannot but mangle their own figures for
institutional ideals—Outland as dead, split up and grotesquely distributed across the novel as

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both figure for and instance of the way it makes itself from itself. Even more devastatingly, the way Outland becomes structurally dissected and dispersed is like the fate of his own “Outland principle”: its revolutionizing of aviation is an image of freedom, yet its inventor was destroyed in the unprecedentedly machinic world war, which featured the first sustained use of aerial warfare. This is Literalism’s war, “one great catastrophe,” as St. Peter will call it (236).

Critics often regard Outland as a character who is the focus of other characters’ sexual longings, or the principle variable in displacements of same-sex desire—for St. Peter, for the members of his family, sometimes for Cather herself. Jonathan Goldberg argues that Tom “is both inside and out; the homosexual lining of the heterosexual as well as the homosexual irritant to the heterosexual; the Lucretian rub of chance that might be nature or might be nature as written and grafted…”14 Eve Sedgwick refers to the novel’s “double refraction,” by which “Cather assumes the position of men and that of male homosexuality,” and that position in turn conceals the visibility of Cather’s own socially proscribed lesbian sexuality.15 But to consider Tom as principally a locus or intermediary of sexual desire is to neglect what is so central and so strange about how he works in the novel. Outland is an object of desire in a novel where desire is always a corollary of aesthetic and institutional formations (and transformations). The reification and distortion of language in the first book is itself a semiotic metaphor for the wartime death and posthumous reification and distortion of Outland—and St. Peter’s own immurement in the human family. In turn, hidden sexual identifications, the yearning for Outland, are simultaneously expressions of the desire for a shift in the entire semiotic and representational

design of the novel. Outland is the supreme linguistic figure of the outside—a sublime figure for
the environment, a metonym for another novel, and so another form of institution and form of
sociality. This is a speculative form that lies beyond the social binds and, at a second-order, the
semiotic torments of the first book. All modes of desire, intimacy, and its failures involving Tom
are emotional and semiotic, bodily and structural, literal and allegorical.

This renders St. Peter’s desire for Outland, Cather’s desire, and the novel’s own desire
equivalent: “…my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the
vulgar tongue” (50). That other tongue is what the second book will try to look like, with a
different society, a different set of material relations, and a language that labors towards divesting
itself of its materiality: “…Your bond with him was social, and it followed the laws of society,
and they are based on property. Mine wasn’t, and there was no material clause in it” (50).

5.

I want to continue my own allegoresis here, moving into the second book, “Tom
Outland’s Story,” which is an inside novel about an outside. The book is Outland’s account of his
former life in the West, specifically his friendship with an older cowboy, Roddy, and their
discovery, while tending cattle in northwestern New Mexico, of an ancient Anasazi cliff city built
into a mesa. The biographical context for this adventure is Cather’s own voyage to the cliff city
Mesa Verde, in 1915, but the provenance of its narrative organization is different: in a 1938
letter, she wrote that the germ of the tripartite structure of the novel itself was a visit, while in
Paris, to “an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings,” where she observed that “[i]n many
of [the paintings] the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished…But in most of the
interior...there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a
stretch of gray sea.”

16 Inspired by these paintings, in the second book of the novel Cather
“wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa…”

17 The middle book, then, is figured quite explicitly as the passage from a closed system into its
environment, so that environment might enter back in, like fresh air blowing through a window
just opened. In “The Novel Démeublé,” we saw the glimpse of a third type of novel, beyond
Literalism and the Démeublé—the reading of “to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and
four walls” in which the man disappears into the walls. Tom Outland’s Story,” too, will play out
an inevitable deadlock between the two allegorical modes of Literalism and the Démeublé. Out
of this will emerge that third type of novel, itself some imagined antidote to the more general
condition of reflexivity that afflicts the novel and its world. This journey will begin with human
hope—and hope for humans.

“Tom Outland’s Story” first resembles an American literary naturalism, a genre that
Cather suggests might set out a way of life and a type of novel opposite that of Hamilton and The
Professor’s House of Hamilton. The perspectival unity of Tom’s sudden first-person (the book
begins: “The thing that sidetracked me…”) is complemented by the signifiers of a typified
naturalism, here accidents, games, and trains in the American West: “The thing that sidetracked
me and made me so late coming to college was a somewhat unusual accident, or string of
accidents. It began with a poker game, when I was a call boy in Pardee, New Mexico” (159).

Style changes in this book, as well, mirroring the movement of cowboys on open ranges and

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17 Ibid., 31.
mesas—the paronomastic tics and compulsions of the first book are given over to a concise imagistic quality and evocation of the visual sense, wedding naturalism to the idealizations of the Western. Among open ranges and empty, elevated cities, relations of production have been redistributed into what Outland calls “human labor and care of the soil in an empty country,” a species-being largely empty of the species (173). These signifiers of naturalism and the Western are strategic generic citations rather than committed generic investments. The limited scope of Hamilton opens up to permit a greater phenomenological range—the landscapes, sounds, motions, and object-world of the idealized American west. The possibility of an entirely new set of social relations, and an allegorical mode with very different terms and possibilities, presents itself.

The book begins with Tom, who is working as a railroad call boy (someone who summons railroad workers when their trains are due to depart), fortuitously meeting an older cowboy, Roddy Blake. Roddy persuades Tom to leave the railway and join him, and the two are hired on to ride a herd of cattle across the New Mexico range, before spending the winter in camp. At the winter camp, on the Cruzados river, Tom becomes enthralled with the massive Blue Mesa, which towers on the opposite side. He first apprehends the distant mesa as only “a pile of purple rock,” pure chromatic and material potential (168). He decides to cross the river “to see what it was like on the other side,” a pilgrim’s crossing and the redoubling of a voyage outside within an embedded book that has itself voyaged outside (168, 173).

Roddy soon joins Tom on the Blue Mesa, and as the two roughhewn cowboys approach it, their sensitivities and sensibilities quickening, they “get a better idea of its actual structure”—commenting upon it with a mix of formalist description (“same precipitous cliffs…the top
seemed to be one great slab” and juridical appreciation of technique (“hard blue rock…soft
streak”) (173). The mesa is apprehended as a preternatural, virtually animate aesthetic form,
something “always before us, and…always changing” upon which the “lightning used to play,”
and which in turn takes the accompanying thunder and “threw it back” (172). This is the new
growth of these pupils’ sensoriums, their aesthetic education is one and the same with the inner
novel’s own self-generation. The landscape transforms the bidirectional instance of the Kantian
experience of beauty into an autogenic process at work in itself—lightning thrown back only in
order to play off itself again, likewise teasing an electric fort-da, like the psychic development of
some weird environmental subject. Form facilitates its observation through a reflexive
illumination that is one and the same with its emergence: “rabbit brush, still yellow, and the
horizontal rays of light, playing into it, brought out the contour of the ground with great
distinctness” (172). We should not regard this as literary Impressionism, insofar as representing
the structure or experience of human sense perception is not the topic in its own right. Instead,
this is the autogenesis of a structural apparatus that stipulates how it is to be perceived and then
applies those precepts to itself—an opening of the sensorium blocked in the first book, the
novel’s reflexive unfolding of descriptive detail after the cramped generality of the specific
allegorical mode of the first book.

On his early journeys into the canyon of the Blue Mesa, Tom can see a structure looming
at its top—what he will soon discover is the “Cliff City,” a series of dwellings built into the mesa
centuries before by an Anasazi tribe, long since vanished. The novel, having encoded a new
sensorium, permits the City to be apprehended as a thing “still as a sculpture—and something
like that,” a place where “it all hung together, and seemed to have a kind of composition” (179).
The City—beautiful, empty, perfectly preserved—sits “like a bird’s nest in the cliff, looking off into the box canyon below…facing an ocean of clear air” (191). What is most crucial about the Cliff City is that it is empty. And what is most crucial about its lovely, empty buildings is that they invert and empty out the full houses of Hamilton and the full buildings of Hamilton University. The City’s original builders, the Anasazi, have long since gone “extinct.” When Father Duchense—a Jesuit priest, amateur anthropologist, and Outland’s former mentor—visits Tom and Roddy on the Cliff City, he says “I am inclined to think your tribe were a superior people…There is evidence on every hand they lived for something more than food and shelter” (197). He then says “I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead, protecting the children…” (198) The superior tribe built a society that did what the prevailing society of the first book could not—religious ceremonies and observances, the protection of children (the first book, after all, is set in the shadow of the world war), respect for the dead (think of the grotesque Outland mansion), a healthy communal life. The paradox is that these cultural practices can be appreciated only because the city is literally dehumanized. Duchesne says that “They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it” (199). Yet that very disappearance was the very event that made possible their humanization. What looks admirable about the Anasazi is the afterimage of their existence and the image of their extinction—the City as an aesthetic form that symbolizes the merits of a people, but a form that can symbolize that merit precisely because there are no people and social forms to corrupt its formal perfection. We recall that back in the lower world St. Peter has to make a journey through “the human house,” which is a daily
misfortune—because that house has humans. Here, the most perfect human is the one who looks like an artwork, and the most perfect artwork is one that has no social predicates attached. A people “built into… this mesa”—recalls Cather writing in “The Novel Démeublé” that “to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls.” This is an absorption and vanishing of person into aesthetic form, and the detachment of aesthetic form from social usages.

In a novel in which built structures figure novels, the City is a figure for an extremely uncanny novel of extinction. This empty, lovely city is a rictus of the afterlife of the realist novel. Tom wanders through the campus of the empty Cliff City, detailing objects like “water jars and bowls,” “cedar joists…felled with stone axes and rubbed through with sand,” and “chambers…frescoed in geometrical patterns” (186, 190, 190). These are objects that metaphorize the very sentences that reference them—the perfection of the objects imaging the limpidity, grace, and functional precision of the prose here, as well. Their ossification—the object as the word—points to the replacement of the conventional social content of realism with a novel whose form and content converge completely, like the convergence of second-order observation with the self, of allegory with what it allegorizes.

6.

The empty Cliff City is also like a university. Its spatial organization resembles a campus—“in it was still another arch, with another group of buildings” (181). We have seen its self-directed pedagogy, an aesthetic education that allows the prose through which it renders itself to be far more sensorily specific than what preceded it in the descriptive generality and semiotic weirdness of the first book. This is a replacement microcosm, the inverse of the old one, like the
heavenly structures at the upper levels of Dante’s heaven—similarly very dead here, but no angels or Beatrice.

But the Cliff City’s pedagogy was also directed towards the aesthetic education of Tom and Roddy, who became—if not exactly cathedral builders (that job is for Professors and Cliff Cities)—than students who can appreciate texture and hue, who are sensitized, receptive. The supremely gifted Tom also becomes an expert reader of the inhuman sentences slipped into the outer-inner novel of the cliff city—“chambers…frescoed in geometrical patterns.” The novel, it seems, cannot so easily abandon its own pedagogic ideals, a more recognizable project of social or national regeneration. To the extent that the novel finds rapport between the artwork and a regenerative type of social organization among people who are not extinct, it recasts the heterosex family as a homosocial or homosexual family. During several blissful months spent on the city, Tom, Roddy, and Henry Atkins—a gentle, old drunk who becomes housekeeper—form an improvised family, what Heather Loves calls the “alternative sociality on the mesa.” That new family pragmatically mirrors the Cliff City—both are united around the idea of a form that requires no biological reproduction, that exists outside the the binds of the family (such is the vision of the novel, at any rate). Christopher Nealon argues that “the idea of an ancient, vanished culture becomes the ruse and condition of St. Peter’s homosexual yearnings.” But no ruse is at hand, because the Cliff City and homosexuality are cross-referential—or cross-referential to the extent that the novel still has patience for any family whatsoever—and together they are encompassed by that structure of desire we have seen for a world that reconciles the

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distantiations of the social, economic, and aesthetic formations of the first book and the lower world, or the world as we know it. In turn, Nealon’s claim that “the book’s great argument…is that heterosexual relations are merely economic…also merely teleological” is surely correct about the novel’s distrust of heterosexual and economic relations. But it ignores the extent to which an earnest teleological vision is fundamental to so much of the novel. This is why many of Cather’s most perceptive recent critics often pass over a core part of the second book: Tom and Roddy’s cataloguing of Cliff City artifacts—“We numbered each specimen, and in my day-book I wrote down where and in what condition we had found it, and what we thought it had been used for”—and Tom’s trip to the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. to seek funding for their extraction and eventual museal display (189).

Tom’s visit to Washington is the attempt, however quixotic, at finding a way to turn the pedagogy of the Cliff City—which is at once a de-peopled artwork and the university of its own professing—into something that in turn might be passed on to redeem the lower world. In a recent article, Eric Aronoff argues that “regional modernism,” of which The Professor’s House is an example, is crucial to modernism’s broader project, because it lies at the juncture of Edward Sapir’s anthropological vision of regional culture as “relative, whole systems of meaning” and the modernist vision of “the literary text as spatial form.” Sapir writes in “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” that “[culture] is not of necessity either high or low; it is merely inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory. It is the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow unified and consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one

20 Ibid., 86.

21 Eric Aronoff, "Anthropologists, Indians, and New Critics: Culture And/As Poetic Form in Regional Modernism," Modern Fiction Studies 55 No. 1 (Spring 2009), 92-118. 94.
element of civilization in its relation to all others.” Aronoff points out that “Sapir's culture is self-referential: rather than a temporal narrative of development, Sapir's culture is held together in space, with meaning arising from each element's "relation to all other" within the system.”

Cather, wary of present national culture, “creates a structural definition of regional culture that parallels Sapir's structuralist theories of language and culture.” At the same moment that a regionalist like Cather was becoming interested in Sapir’s account of the synchronic, self-referential structure of regional culture, so were future New Critics like John Crowe Ransom. In Ransom’s case, it would prove essential to the ideological tenets and method of the New Criticism (we recall Tom carrying “a soft blue stone, the colour of robbins’ eggs,” back to Hamilton in the first book, the Cliff City’s own well-wrought urn).

The New Critical theory of the poem as a verbal “icon” holds that the icon “presented the object in a way that was directly opposed to the abstractions of capitalist rationalization. It did not seek to rationalize the object, but presented it as a complex entity.” This ideology, first articulated 1930’s I’ll Take My Stand, a collection of essays by Southern intellectuals (including Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, and John Gould Fletcher), complements Cather’s own account of capitalist rationalization and its forms of art—consider the graphic abstractions and commodity fetishism that run through the first book of The Professor’s House. By contrast, the Cliff City itself looks like a proleptic model of the New Critical poem—perhaps not

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23 Ibid., 96.
24 Ibid., 94.
unexpectedly, given the mutual investment in Sapir. Tom’s is a portable and easily conveyable poem, a single poem from the supreme omnibus of the Cliff City. In turn, Tom’s voyage to Washington proleptically allegorizes the spread of the New Criticism as an easily conveyable pedagogical method. The paradox here is that the novel’s proposal for a possible culture is one that substitutes aesthetic organization for social organization, as culture becomes not just expendable, but necessarily eliminable. This is the structure of Sapir’s self-referential regional culture, deprived of its human content, leaving a self-referential aesthetic form behind that has nothing to communicate to itself or others but its own formal perfection. So it is, in other words, a repudiation of the object of Sapir’s anthropology but a maintenance of some of its formalism. Walter Benn Michaels argues that “what Tom experiences on the blue mesa is thus the recovery of Indian culture, which is to say, of the very idea of culture.”  

But the great gift of the Anasazi people was to go extinct by enfolding themselves into a masterpiece, the emergence of which is looped to that extinction, of a people and of their distinct culture, as its very condition of possibility.

While the New Criticism would have a long and successful institutional journey, Tom Outland does not. Washington D.C. is yet another Hamilton University. Take Tom’s encounters with distended egos and inequitable power differentials, like his meeting with the director of the Smithsonian: “I was amazed and ashamed…that a scholar with so many degrees, to find it worth his while to show off to a boy” (208). As Tom quickly grows embittered by Washington, his disenchantment spreads into the mimetic field of the novel: “the Washington monument colour with those beautiful sunsets, until the time when all the clerks streamed out of the Treasury

building and the War and the Navy” (211). These are “like people in slavery,” a mass of little
Literalist humans (211). These are also the type of humans who will be taught how to read like
New Critics, and they are like the type of humans we encountered back in the bad old days of
Hamilton University—to which “Tom Outland’s Story” here begins to revert, dangerously. The
novel provides a proleptic, deeply pessimistic account of the future institutionalization of the
New Criticism—an institutionalization that would of course occur. As Gerald Graff writes of the
1950s, “In the wake of the critical revolution, critics could now accumulate interpretations
without regard for any purpose behind them…[Criticism] was not immune to becoming an
industry in which the routines of production obscured the humanistic ends production
presumably served.”27 Just like Scott writes his daily poem, the profession and its pupils write
daily about the irony, allegory, and paradox of poems. Now the novel’s two-sided rejection of the
New Critical model is premised on the conviction that the poem (or novel, in this case) should
not be like culture, and that it not being like culture should itself not become a culture. The last,
best hope of regeneration fails here, because this episode stands in for the fate of art and
pedagogy more generally in the lower world. And so the attempt to retain the novel in the human
community by abstracting it from culture but somehow still rendering it available to pedagogy
fails, though it was of course doomed from the outset.

7.

Throughout the first book of *The Professor’s House*, a striking distinction is drawn between the human and something else, a term for which remains unspecified in the novel. We might just call it the inhuman, which is the unnamed term the novel suggests we arrive at—for instance, Lillian St. Peter says to her husband, “I think your ideas were better when you were your most human self” (142). The inhuman self of St. Peter thinks with foreboding of “that perilous journey down through the human house,” where he will encounter the fragmented bodies, relations, and compositional dilemmas of Literalism and be reminded of the novel he is within (18). The question becomes what it means for a novel to fall outside of itself, especially when the novel references itself as an allegorical figure for types of individuals and institutions, as well: “Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed” (250).

This distinction takes a more startling, lethally motivated form as the pedagogical model fails: falling out of the human family by pushing the human family out of the novel. There has all along been something deeply uncanny about the Cliff City and its relation to its past inhabitants, and even to life itself. With “no soil,” the only signs of organic life are some preserved grains, and cadaverous stragglers like “a few, flat-topped cedars growing out of the cracks and a little pale grass” (185). There is death, though—the city houses several mummies, one that the men name “Eve”, and “in a small dark chamber…three bodies, one man and two women, wrapped in yucca-fiber” (192). Eve is “a dried human body, a woman” found “lying on a yucca mat, partly covered with rags…dried into a mummy in the water-drinking air” (191). In her naming, and the brief narrative that will attach to her, she becomes something of a pseudo-character. The men surmise that Eve died as the result of “a great wound in her side” which has left “[h]er mouth…!
open as if she was screaming” (192). Father Duchesne infers that Eve was murdered during a domestic conflict. The weird, graphic mixup of biblical resonances continues: “ribs stuck out through dried flesh…Part of the nose…gone, plenty of teeth, not one missing, and a great deal of coarse black hair” (192). The men’s naming-act, the bestowal of “Eve,” deistic in light of the name, links species-birth and species-death into a single figure—Eve as named origin, Eve as murdered end. The nastiness of her description, its gross physicality—evoking the “gaudy fingers of the showman” and “animal pulp” in the novel Démeublé—is seemingly overdetermined in its descriptive excess. If Eve figures a locus of human generation, her wound is also a synecdoche of social history, the too-material body bearing a mark of violence inflicted within a network of conjugal relations. The original sin, in other words, is sociality, which includes both normative and non-normative configurations—it includes all configurations, all possible communities, families, types of human intimacy. This original sin—which is the symbolic truth of the social—is parent to the problem of Literalism, and this accounts for the failure of any attempt at art as a redemptive social program. In its condemnation of human origin as such, this symbol is also a great wound in the side of anthropology, and of that late product of human culture, the supremely self-reflexive genre called the novel (and its social functions).

On either side of the D.C. episode, as if once in speculative preparation and once in confirmed execution, we have the ongoing extinction of the Cliff City’s contemporary occupants. By the time Tom departs for Washington, Henry has already been dispatched, emptied of mind by a snake’s bite “square in the forehead…near the brain” (195). The violence and seeming arbitrariness of this death (a snake bite near the brain!) is perhaps not arbitrary at all insofar as the oddly vicious detail of the punctured brain implies the paralysis of cognition, and so the
paralysis of observation. The artifactual contents of the Cliff City will themselves next be
liquidated. While Tom is on his failed endeavor to Washington, Roddy sells the entire collection
of artifacts. Eve too disappears in Tom’s absence, to a place that sounds distinctly infernal, on her
way out returning the favor of a killing: “She went to the bottom of Black Canyon and carried
Hook's best mule along with her” (188). Roddy’s sale of the objects, coincident in diegetic time
with the failure of the project in D.C., is the liquidation of the remnants of a participatory
dimension between the human actor and the inhuman city—some shared syntax—and human
participation as such.

When Tom returns and discovers the sale, he is outraged. Sensing his fate, Roddy begs
not to be torn out of the novel: “Don’t rip me up until you hear all about it…” (217). Tom, just
prior to banishing Roddy, in a crucial moment of accusatory invention, tells Roddy that he had
“made all his plans” to maintain possession of the artifacts while “on the way back” from
Washington. However, in a parenthetical aside he then admits to the story’s addressee—we
assume it is St. Peter—“(It was a lie, I hadn’t)” (219). What is uncanny about Tom’s lie is the
gap between his personal lack of motive for it and the absolute necessity of Roddy’s expulsion
for what will subsequently occur in the Cliff City. A presence within the textual field of the
novel, as if the Cliff City itself had possessed Tom, uses Tom as an actant to eradicate other
people. And so Roddy leaves, and Tom alone remains in this upper world.

With Outland alone, we see what is the first true scene of intimacy at work in the novel,
the first true consummation of desire. Outland passes outside himself—an outland of Outland—
to the order of an anti-character, as cognition, memory, observation, and representation become
identical with their object, the Cliff City: “I remember these things because, in a sense, that was
the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was was there.

This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole” (226). This is a fantasy of the work staging itself as a totality that coincides with its observer, negating the distance between observer and world.

To see the mesa as a whole is like seeing a New Critical poem as an expert might, but for “all of me” to be there is to become absorbed in the work of art, like a re-versioning of what happened to the Anasazi, who were built into their perfect city and in that way vanished. It is to become the novel’s inhuman conception of a New Critical poem—a structure and a work of art without culture or people. The novel cannot give up the idea of the institutional world (the university, the offices within it, the publishing house) which remains as its reference point for the very form and formal properties of the artwork, which cannot be erased so long as we are reading a novel. Here a revised pedagogical program returns: “It was the first time I’d ever studied methodically, or intelligently” (227). But what is Tom studying? Being full to the brim with information is being full to the brim with environment, information as environment: “Nothing tired me…Up there alone, a close neighbor to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way…I used to feel that I couldn’t have borne another hour of that consuming light, that I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep” (227). There is no hermeneutic administered here, no interpretive schema, no truth procedures or methods specific to any known discipline. The integration of Outland with an aesthetic form—the Cliff City—that sustains life, while altogether repudiating the human lifeworld, is like a university that negates the human disciplines and offers a speculative, inhuman one in their place, and, because institutions and novels are cross-referential in *The Professor’s House*, like a speculative, inhuman type of novel.
On the Cliff City, any interest in the construction of causal chains is duly discarded—“I didn’t feel the need of that record” (227), as the quintessentially metonymic organization of novels is repudiated as a threat to totality: “I didn’t want to go back and unravel things step by step. Perhaps I was afraid I would lose the whole in the parts” (228). As Frances Ferguson argues, “the novel as it develops from the eighteenth century on has become preeminently the genre of social evaluation…That is it judges characters and treats them as if they could be evaluated. And it accomplishes this process through showing social reaction and through devising plots to produce the sense of outcomes.”28 And so Tom’s rejection of cause and effect is a rejection of both the novel as we know it and the utilitarian social structures it develops alongside and assists in developing. Tom pauses the telling of his story to comment that reading Virgil now is to “see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green pinons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a rude rising in their midst, rising strong, with a calmness and courage—behind it a dark grotto, in its depths a crystal spring” (228). The eye enframes both the signs on the page and the world behind it, seeing doubly, or seeing one and the same thing; the world behind the novel is seen as if through the novel as a transparency—as the content of the novel, just as, inversely, the novel becomes the content of the world. The eye and the novel coincide, and so self, world, and novel at once read, contain, and write themselves as a single feedback loop. Tom says of this “It was possession…For me the mesa was no longer an adventure but a religious emotion” (227). This is Cather’s “glory of the Pentecost,” a world of mutual possession in which adventure—plot, sequence—gives way to an end to reflexivity, to “one man, and four walls.”

For Terry Eagleton, a reflexivity that balances theoretical abstraction and cognitive particularity defines the aesthetic from its outset:

If the aesthetic intervenes here, it is as a dream of reconciliation—of individuals woven into intimate unity with no detriment to their specificity, of an abstract totality suffused with all the flesh-and-blood reality of the individual being.\(^{29}\)

Here, Eagleton’s metaphors take on an eerily literal quality, because Tom really does seem to be woven into an intimate unity with an abstract totality. Negated is the dream of an abstract totality that preserves specificity, which classically models a bourgeois state and set of state institutions, like universities and their disciplines. What remains is the strange vision of an abstract totality suffused with an individual being with reality but no flesh-and-blood. Tom’s specificity as a subject is blissfully emptied out, and state and state institutions are replaced by a post-social vision of the institution (which never dies, even if everything else does), a post-social vision of the aesthetic, and a post-social vision of the person—the possibility of being a non-person in an inhuman novel, which is now something that a novel imagines and yearns for.

Shortly after this, Tom descends from this magic mountain, and comes to Hamilton University, so that he can meet St. Peter and the novel can begin, begin to allegorize about persons, novels, and universities, and begin its need to escape itself.

8.

At the beginning of the third book we find St. Peter editing Outland’s diary, as a professor might. We also find the Professor exhausted with the profession of professing. Merrill Maguire Skaggs argues that Cather required “a civilized, educated analyst who knows the past and who

can comment with authority on Outland’s story.” Yet once human pedagogy and humans are killed off, and so human universities and their disciplines, and once to be Outland and to be with Outland is to not exist as a person, there is nothing left to comment on with authority—to profess—other than an extinct pedagogy or a pedagogy of extinction.

There has been something preparatory about St. Peter’s work from the outset. He won his major academic prize for Spanish Adventures in North America—men who killed native peoples, so his archives are the records of the makings of empty cities and extinction. The last and finest of its volumes were written under the influence of Outland: “If the last four volumes…were more simple and inevitable than those that went before, it was largely because of Outland” (234).

We never learn more about these histories, which is not coincidental—they are academic testaments to adventure, death, and silence. At the last, in the third book, his family on a lengthy visit to France—the novel having expunged them, as it expunged everyone on the Cliff City at the last except for Outland—St. Peter is blissfully alone and at work editing Outland’s diaries of his days on the Cliff City. This is also a writing we never see, and Outland’s writing is itself best because certain things in it do not exist, are tossed out—it is “beautiful because of the stupidities avoided, and the things it did not say” (238).

What we are now seeing is a continuation of the serialized inversion of the human world, and the serial substitution of alternative predicates for it—of an institution, of an artwork, of a family, of a person. And now, in its most detailed form—last but not least—of what a novel Démeublé, as specifically written, might look like. St. Peter now calls this genre “a novel mental dissipation” (239). The compositional method is what he calls his “reversion,” which is also a re-

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30 Merrill Maguire Skaggs, After the World Broke in Two: the Later Novels of Willa Cather, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 68.
versioning—an anti-history, an anti-anthropology, and an anti-novel. The isolated St. Peter begins by realizing the sovereignty of sheer contingency, now in a frame that, however paradoxically, stands in for the “real” life of Hamilton: “All the most important things in his life, St. Peter sometimes reflected, had been determined by chance” (233). Tom experienced contingency within the generic signifier of the poker game, but St. Peter reflects on contingency, which is to say, as a professor. But the recognition of chance seems to reflexively loosen the bonds of the outer realist novel itself—as if it begins applying these precepts to itself—eroding the tissue of its structural determinants and their necessity. St. Peter spends his days annotating Tom’s diaries (“he had pleasantly trifled away two months at a task which should have taken little more than a week”) and resting on the shore of Lake Michigan (238-9). It is no coincidence that this rest looks much like Outland absorbing the cliff city’s inhuman world, just as it looks like his history unfolding (that history is five volumes and not seven—but close enough…): “He found he could lie on his sand-spit by the lake for hours and watch the seven motionless pines drink up the sun” (239). These are substitutions of research for the natural, a loosening of the professional function.

Soon St. Peter begins to discover and become written into a latent, preexisting novel within himself, something like the novelistic version of being built into a city, whether a Cliff City or the manifesto’s “One man, four walls.” What St. Peter finds inside himself is a speculative novel, long ago begun and then aborted, now rediscovered—its protagonist himself as a spectral childhood self, once consanguine, but later severed and forgotten: “The boy and he had meant, back in those far-away days, to live some sort of life together and share good or bad fortune. They had not shared together, for the reason that they were unevenly matched. After his
adoption into the Thierault household, he remembered that other boy very rarely, in moments of home-sickness” (239-40). We might describe this split as the child’s entrance into the symbolic order, into the human house. But it is also a split into a second-order, juridical relationship to the aesthetic and the loss of some first-order coincidence with it. This is a split is into the realist novel and the world it shapes and expresses, the world where the novel does not exist outside of the institutions that support it—the literary system, the public, the university, a codified sense of human history that can be culled from and dramatized as a horizon for a novelistic anthropology.

The realism we have read has been an aberration, its syntax and semantics centered on a misbegotten social and professional sphere: “the man he was now” had “grown strong” “consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb ‘to love’” (240). The realist novel that models one’s life, and by which one has modeled one’s life, is a double-impostiture, now seen from afar through the lens of a compositional double-consciousness: “the design of his life had been the work of this secondary social man, the lover’” (240). As Paul de Man writes, “if it were not for novels, no one would know for certain that he is in love,” and if to be in love is unreal, then a novel that cannot teach love would be what St. Peter says is “the realest of his lives”:

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun spanned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom’s old cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine-trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: “That is right.” Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his

31 de Man, Resistance to Theory, 45.
path, he said: “That is it.” When the maple-leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch,—like the skin on old faces,—he said: “That is true; it is time.” All these recognitions gave him a kind of sad pleasure. (241)

At first this reads like a naturalist novel of regression written in the key of Wordsworth (“Intimations of Animality”). But the romanticized childhood self is not an innocent with some visionary and unspoiled relationship to nature, later lost in the passage into experience and the social self, into the novel of the man. Rather, he is as an immanence born of an ecstatic collapse of distinctions between inside and outside, self and world, social and natural—much like Tom at the end of the second book. But this extreme primitivism is also an extremely formalized one, because—as we should by now expect—it encodes a pedagogical apparatus. There is still a certain type of professor here, as one who offers officializing aesthetic judgment—except without body or office. The paragraph hinges on several indexical expressions, utterances in which the indexical designated (like “it”, “that”, “he”) shifts depending on context—“That is right”, “That is it”, “That is true; it is time.” These are easy to take for granted. But what exactly is indexed in these moments? The referent of the first “that” seems to be the scene described, and the referent of the second seems to be the “curly root.” In effect, the novel turns history into natural history. But the “it” doubles as a type of event. For “That is right” and “That is it” lie midway between an aesthetic judgment and a judgment of practical reason, the latter a recognition—a reflexive one—of the endorsed work. It turns the third book into a reader and a professor, depersonalizing the New Critical relationship and collapsing pedagogue and material into an asocial, self-inciting structure. The artwork recursively generates and approves itself by adhering to the codes and set of standards that are its content. In other words, the dead end of the
inhuman epiphany still mechanizes a self-validating aesthetic judgment and its manifesto-like protocol, one that seeks to expend with the human faculties, with allegory or semiotics, absorbing them and performing their critical functions in lieu of their human cognitions or structure. In this respect, we have the preservation of the fantasy of an inhuman professing, an inhuman discipline, an inhuman institution and work of art, all bound up in one—a world outside the world. If the novel cannot conceptualize a world without institutional forms, it can conceptualize institutional forms without people, or a world without people that still works. Rather than the utopia of a world of people without institutions, this is a utopia of institutions—and works of art like novels that work like them, and now cannot be conceived outside of them—without people.

The only practical or novelistic ramification, then, is a dead self—is silence. What soon follows, then, several pages later, is mortality—“Along with the other states of mind which attended his realization of the boy Godfrey, came a conviction…that he was nearing the end of his life” (243). Shortly thereafter St. Peter’s conviction to end communication realizes itself in the form of a suicide attempt, in his office.

9.

In a novel about the production of novels and institutions, perhaps the central site is St. Peter’s attic office. The office (St. Peter calls it his “study,” but the names are exchangeable) is a “dark den” that “for many years had been the professor’s study” (8). This is where St. Peter finds continuous refuge from the human house, where he composes his histories, and where, in the third book, just prior to or alongside his “reversion,” he is at work editing Outland’s diaries of his
days on the Cliff City. It is the space where embedded works that provide passage to upper and inner worlds are produced. But this is not the only office in the house: just as there are two types of novel, uneasily conjoined, so are there two offices. The upstairs one, central to the novel, and a fleetingly-mentioned downstairs office: “Downstairs, off the back parlour, he had a show study, with roomy shelves where his library was housed, and a proper desk at which he wrote letters. But it was a sham” (8). Here, the production of letters—the reproduction of the affairs of the human world—is real insofar as it occurs, but a sham insofar as the world it sustains is a human one.

In a novel so intent on staging a human novel and its inversion, and likewise so self-reflexive and agonized about its reflexivity, I want to track this office, the ur-space of The Professor’s House, and a particular, particularly uncanny arrangement of the ur-space of the classic realist novel. The office, we know—precisely the type of office that here is labeled a “sham”—has a privileged position in American realisms. Take Bartley Hubbard’s office in The Rise of Silas Lapham—for Mark Seltzer an exemplary instance of the office in realist fictions. The office where Hubbard interviews Lapham and simultaneously transcribes his story, where space indexes its own depiction, and where reference and self-reference fold into one another, makes visible “a flattening or adequation of the world to its description and description to its world, in running commentary, as the first principle of its realism.”32 That office is a repertoire of techniques for the world to observe and record itself—“[i]ts operating systems,” both the material technologies it uses and the forms of action of its participants, “an overlit realm ruled by

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32 Seltzer, The Official World, 84.
numbers, records, and self-persuasive events.”

Hubbard’s office in Lapham corresponds to the sham office in *The Professor’s House*, the latter as its icon or sign because invoked rather than represented in its workings. That office attaches itself to those sham (because too human) people that are the ontological and, at the reflexive level, textual effects of a world of the realist office and the productive and reproductive modes it supports. The inhuman, and therefore real, office in the novel is the one that symbolically positions itself above and outside (above as outside, again and again) the official office. The office in realism is distinct insofar as it condenses the techniques of the world within it, so it is at once a part of the plot of the novel and a space for the production of the world of the plot. In *The Professor’s House*, the refiguring or refitting of the office is the most direct expression of a speculative refiguring or refitting of the realist novel, and of the technics of the world it makes.

Along these lines, we notice that in place of a familiar narrative inventory of the contents of the realist office—files, typewriters, pens and paper, etc., which articulate the poetics of the world’s self-depiction—a differently strange array of objects constitutes St. Peter’s real office. In the office are two mannequined torsos (“a headless, armless female torso”); Augusta, an elderly “sewing-woman” who records “patterns” with pin and thread, in place of Hubbard recording an interview; a professor stepping outside of the human family rather than reporting his rise in it (the second book we might rename The Rise of Tom Outland, or, with an eye to Cather’s modernism, The Magic Mountain); a chest divided between patterns on one side and papers on the other (“in the middle of the box, patterns and manuscripts interpenetrated”), itself repeating in miniature the tripartite structure of the novel; St. Peter’s histories and Outland’s diaries like

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33 Ibid., 82.
rudiments of a possible world premised on its absolute limit from—rather than reproduction of—the one downstairs (8, 13). There is also the inventorying of rhetoric itself: St. Peter hypostasizes the partial mannequins as “metonymies” (“the Professor once explained to Augusta how, in calling it so, she followed a natural law of language, termed, for convenience, metonymy”) (9). Metonymy is itself something of an ur-trope of the novel—think of how each book feeds into the other, or how the books are concerned with partiality and totality—and here that figure is itself objectified, as the novel exteriorizes and arrays the rhetoric that composes it. Most crucially, the office contains a desk that is less a planar surface upon which the world might copy itself than it is a mode of both social withdrawal and transportation—“a shelter one could hide behind, it was a hole one could creep into” (141).

From interpretations of partial persons, to the very tropes that govern the novel’s poetics, to cliff cities, to histories, to modes of transportation: the upstairs office contains a figural inventory of virtually everything in the novel, spread out in a small space as the novel’s own objectivized contents. The inventory spans the breadth of the novel’s representational system, as if seen from the hermeneutic disposition of that upper world, which substitutes figural gatherings, and gatherings of the bits and pieces of what will make the artwork in which they emerge, for social ones. Here we might turn to Fredric Jameson’s account of the office in Raymond Chandler. For Jameson, the office in Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe novels proves to be “a single archetypal space which can stand for the human dwelling as such…it is the office as such, which is in Chandler, if not a well-nigh ontological category, then at least one which subsumes a much wider variety of social activities than it is normally understood to do.”

variety of social activities subsumed forms a “complete and closed semiotic system”\textsuperscript{35} that “span[s] the breadth of the social system.” The entire repertoire of Chandlerian spaces are contained—metonymically—within the office, but it is an antisocial system. The complete and closed semiotic system, a condensation of elements that expands to a total mapping of social space, alternatively appears in Cather’s office as a variety of narrative materials recursively subsumed into the space that they will generate and be generated from. The space contains itself, and scrupulously avoids anything like involvement in the semiotics of a social system (or the office downstairs). In place of this, it substitutes metonyms of its own compositional contents, and figures those metonyms as aesthetic in kind (patterns, sewings). Perhaps the strange bridge between Seltzer’s account and Jameson’s account, with respect to \textit{The Professor ‘House} is the following: the upper office, rather than being a nucleus (and effect) of the reproduction of the world in general, enfolds the rudiments of the speculative or possible world toward which the novel bends, gathered together as if in a gestating zone, literally segregating itself as a graphic distinction from the other office. This entails a different ontology of the office, one that bypasses the expected means of mediation, like those in Hubbard’s office. The upstairs office positions itself as an engine distinct from the types of offices we see in Howells, James, Chesnutt, Dreiser, among others. It seeks the appearance of the matter of that other world within itself, as if, internally, it might engineer the very conditions of its alternative to realism, and provide the ontological category for its production.

Within the realist office the most critical space is the desk, which, in St Peter’s inhuman office, is “a shelter one could hide behind, it was a hole one could creep into.” This description

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 72, 73.
of the desk offers up more than just a metaphor for the introverted solitude of artists and intellectuals. The desk really is a mode of transport. We can compare the desk to those corridors Kate Marshall outlines as crucial features of realist and (residually) naturalist novels of this period, “built structures” that “figure the novel’s materiality as a communicative artifact bound up in the transmission networks recalled by halls and passages.” A hole one can creep into seems corridor indeed; yet the corridors in The Professor’s House that correspond to Marshall’s historicized corridoric forms, “a dominant organizational structure in modern domestic and institutional architecture”—in the novel, hallways, stairways, train compartments, campus pathways—are relayed to the partial, frenetic making of selves and styles at that lower, human level of the novel (7). In a novel insistent in calling attention to architectonics, despair and formal incompleteness meet in these communicative channels. Their material-medial metaphoricity references the bad world of the Literalist novel. The historically-specific building materials of represented infrastructure, the traces of material history, are crucial for Marshall’s account of novels, just as they are inextricable from her account of the relationship between selves and such channels of communication, “the relationship between interiors and interiority” (6). But the corridor yielded by the desk—the hole into which one crawls—is by design immaterial as a means of transport: it is a medium of transport assignable to no material referent, other than tropes, because it is an impossible technology.

Marshall argues that the corridor and communication metaphorize one another because their organizational system is the same (the passageways of bodies, the passageways of signs):

While there seems to be a danger in taking corridors as metaphors for literary communication, the status of metaphor within language as a device of

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36 Kate Marshall, Corridor, 5. Subsequently cited paranthetically in main text.
transport between signifiers implies that the figure and the space fulfill the same function, and have similarly attendant problems. Michael de Certeau for instant, points out that the public transportation system in Athens is called the “metaphorai”—quite literally transport—to show that the text moves from one place to another in an organizational system that also forms the condition of the railway car…Passageways make metaphors in the sense that they transport bodies and communicate between interiors. (14)

The formal commonality among corridors, transportation networks, literary communication, and tropes like metaphor draws on both the metaphorical and the material for its ratification, facts of language as literary form and facts of matter as built form. This punned doubleness seems sufficient to allow us to find a principle analogous to corridoricity, with caveats, in virtually any literary work, specific to the conditions of the work. The constant would be a metaphorical shift in line with a material-medial shift, specific to the literary form and embedded media in question, this resulting in the specific concept and its name. What the particularity of the principle—corridoricity, in Cather’s moment—does is to diagnose the finer and more specific historical relationships in question: the corridor, specifically, becomes such a powerful heuristic because it is highly visible within a critical moment in the organization of reflexive modernity. This organization becomes acutely visible in and through novels of the moment—a moment that, in turn, makes ideas like corridoricity thinkable and its basis visible. The model is portable, but with differing diagnostic and hermeneutic potential depending on its historical object (one of the reasons for the many insights offered by the book Corridor). Overtly overdetermined by the corridor form—specific to the moment of The Professor’s House—what the upstairs office does is to seek to jump out of—or, to use St. Peter’s language to “fall out” of—not just the corridor, but, in figuring this fall, material and novelistic history. It seeks to do so
by in effect inventing—through a sort of apophasis or empty form—a mode of transport, a certain technology (and so a metaphoricity) the conditions of which allows for the figuration of a distinct organizational system of the transportation of information and bodies. This is its own impossible alternative to corridoricity, its own self-legislated conditions. The upper story of *The Professor’s House*—that locus of its inhuman office, that zone of the autopoeisis of this speculative internal novel—is insistent in its imagining of a vehicle for its own mode of literary transport that would explode the communication of passageways, or human houses. In doing so, it would explode many of the predicates of persons and the informational networks that coordinate their social forms. It would likewise rupture the historical organization of medial-material, social, and literary forms that, in Cather’s moment, converge into corridoricity and its ramifications—like the making of modern persons and their interiority, or their role in the observational feedback loops of novels in the early twentieth century, as Marshall discusses at length. In terms of the office, the technology within, and its troping, we have something like the image of an entirely fantastical productive edifice.

In the inhuman office, the desk, “a hole one could creep into,” upon which things like histories and novels are written, is the key to this alternate system of transport. The desk works by dissolving the partitions between frames, rendering form, world, and mind seamlessly conjoined, even exchangeable. Consider St. Peter’s reminiscence of a voyage alongside Outland to the southwest, which would prove to be the germ of his final and most successful history: “Two years after Tom’s graduation they took the copy of Fray Garces’ manuscript…and went down into the South-west together…By autumn they had been over every mile of his trail on horseback. Tom could take a sentence from Garces’ diary and find the exact spot at which the
missionary crossed the Rio Colorado on a certain Sunday in 1775” (235). Here, the network is unpartitioned—not enclosed, not divided—but constituted by the unobstructed passages that coordinate, backwards and forwards, the metaleptic movement across memory within the present, physical motion upon the open earth, the material medium of language within the book, the present world of the voyage and the past world overlaid upon it. This metaleptic movement, a rotating palimpsest of media in the broadest sense, likewise becomes a form of interiority, and interiority becomes the image of the novel passing in and through itself, unobstructed, recursive. History—1775, 1925—dissolves into these rotations, vacates the gap between years, and the division between one’s memory and others’ memories. It negates the passage of history—not least of all, the World War and its countless dead—by folding history into itself. This unnameable technology conspicuously positions itself opposite a corridic mode of transport and interiority, and metaphor finds its own reflexive material metaphor in metalepsis. In Beautiful Circuits, Mark Goble takes up modernist “book[s] about relationships made possible by technology that are experienced as equally satisfying, if not more intense and affecting, as relationships with technology. In modernism, these relationships depend on the materiality of mediums…”37 The upper office is like the telegraph office in James’s “In the Cage” metamorphosed, and desks or Outland vacuums (or cliff cities)—and the movement between them—are the signs of technologies that simply doesn’t exist, of immaterial material mediums. These of course register technical media as their precondition, and then imagine unformulable opposites, the immense tropic power of the novel as their vehicle (and their technology).

This principle extends to the broadest level of organization of the novel, as well, the way its three books join together in a feedback loop, even cycling outermost pagination back into the narrative proper—its epigraph, words spoken by Louie Marsellus in the first book, is “A turquoise set in dull silver, wasn’t it…yes, a turquoise set in silver.” A sentence that graphemically mirrors its utterance; an object that metaphorizes the annular structure of the book; a circular movement that, no matter which route it takes, arrives at the jewel poised in its center and moves on from there. We see this too in the clandestine physical patterning of the novel, from St. Peter’s swimming weightless, to the elevated structure of the Cliff City, to voyages across minds in time, a virtual secret infrastructure as a negation of infrastructure—“…there was a crack in the ledge, a sort of manhole, and in this we hung a ladder of pine-trunks spliced together with light chains”—the channels of cracks and sewers overlaid with light chains and chains of light. Even in the downstairs human world characters work to hasten this vision—alongside St. Peter, the ascetic Dr. Crane, Outland’s former lab partner, labors in cloistral solitude in a “room…like any study behind a lecture room: dusty books, dusty files, but no apparatus” (125). He is a man trapped within a cell who “‘doesn't care anything but the extent of space,’” and “whatever poor Crane can find out about space is more good to him than all the money the Marsellus’s will ever have” (72). Here, we are hard-pressed not to think of Stephen Crane, who left such an impression on Cather—as if in some discovery of limitless space, of limitless oxygen, he might have escaped a death characterized by his body enclosing its very spaces of breath, as if through a dream of “revolutionizing aviation” he might have been saved (30). Stephen Crane is reborn in another adventurer, Tom Outland, who dies young on the Western Front, where death goes on in trenches that are like constricted airways in the body.’
point here, though, is not some exaltation of an imagined human community—it is the complete removal of all partitions between psychic systems, and so the dissolution of psychic systems more generally, and the dissolution of all restrictions on the self-generation and self-circulation of the novel, which, in a brief, lovely instance—as if in the moment before a disappearance—summons an image of human beings freed from the restrictions of bodies, gravity, and time, and the losses that always comes with those.

In many respects, the novel develops a type of science-fiction or speculative fiction housed within its realism—imaginings of utopias and dystopias, imaginings of material and psychic technologies that do not exist, the Cliff City like those massive, seemingly organic columns on the ocean surface of Solaris that give shape to our hidden drives in Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris*, or the imbrication of worlds like the two (at times lethally) imbricated cities in China Mieville’s *The City and the City*, empty or dead worlds like those in Beckett, or the fictions of apocalypse and speculative futures of the contemporary moment. For *The Professor’s House*, at the last, to think about what is best or most ideal in persons is no longer to think about social actors, unlike the realities of Howells or James, nor is it even to think of persons as linguistic figures or informational nodes, which is what Crane and Jewett discovered in their realities. Instead, it is to think about them as nothing at all, or to not think about them at all, or simply to not think at all. At the last, extinction—novels, people, institutions—become the symptomatic image of the novel form exhausted with the world it cannot help but belong to and perpetuate.

Yet there is another turn here. For the person, the story of extinction and the possibility of an inhuman office is the displacement of its own self-despair, a science-fiction vision of some
world that generates itself as an artwork, in which we can be or be absorbed without having to beourselves, in what is a simultaneous registration of and exhaustion with reflexivity—already, in 1925, the longing for an outland. But what of the office itself, in its most uncanny aspect, as something that seems to have generated itself within the novel, that serially responds to and negates the human predicates of realism? If we return to Crane’s “Howells Fears the Realists Must Wait,” with that uncanny rhetorical portrait of Howells in the park’s darkness outside his office—a figure for the entrance of figuration into America realism—here that figuration has extended to encompass the entirety of the autopoietic apparatus of realism. It is Howells the man who is now outside what was once his office, looking in at his alien face from the darkness. The rhetoric of realism and the form of the novel has transformed to such an extent that what appeared as monstrous catachreses, or terraformed corpses, has taken on the organizational complexity and systematicity of the office itself. This, then, presages that self-making world to come, as inhuman rhetoric animates itself into the systems by which the world works and makes itself from itself, day after day, generating as a constitutive response within art (and without it) fantasy after fantasy of Cliff Cities and Outlands.

10.

After his reversioning, that terminal statement of St. Peter’s is a suicide attempt, but anequivocal one: “The long-anticipated coincidence had happened, he realized. The storm had blown the stove out and the window shut…He hadn’t lifted his hand against himself—was he required to lift it for himself?” (252). We now have the intertext of the realist (Dreiser’s Hurstwood) or modernist suicide (Faulkner’s Quentin Compson), here the human extinctual
corollary of novel mental dissipation and its sibling iterations. Yet the extraordinary irony of St. Peter’s suicide is that it becomes a return to the social sphere and the terminal repudiation of its original goal. In its crucial posing of an ethical question (“was he required to lift it for himself?”), the novel transforms itself, in a dialectical fashion in line with the fantastical water-drinking air of the cliff city sublimated into carbon monoxide: the ethical question immediately directs us to social organization, moving backwards through a Durkheimian sociological topos to an ethical question as old as Plato’s Socrates. The inhuman office, in the very act, becomes the human one. A secondary characterological displacement is the reappearance of the elderly Catholic housekeeper Augusta—call it the novel’s counter-reformation, and call Augusta a few letters shy of that saint who resolved the distensio. For Augusta, death and nature are matters of fact, and these matters of fact are dialogical: “She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy march, or any of the sadness of nature” (256). A realism that defines itself by its articulation of a social contract is reasserted as (merely) adequate: “Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter of factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal. He even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping definition, but real. And when you admitted that a thing was real, that was enough—now” (257). This is a middle ground neither floral nor florid: “she was the bloomless side of life.” As a self-referential allegory of stylistic and social reformation, this is in effect an allegory of becoming non-allegorical. The door of the inhuman office is closed. Language is soldered back to a compact of social obligation, a fusion of the novel to a formal functionality and a linearity that mirrors the cause-and-effect of action in the world, a reality principle of the novel (and the novel as such) that is anything but annular. It is yet not the world one desires, but the world one must bear.
Cather will return to the mesa in her next novel, but never again will her work return to the deepest concerns of *The Professor’s House*, and their instancing in its formal experiments. Like Conrad’s description of a dying Crane looking out his window at a sailboat, and like the last lines of *The Professor’s House* as our unnamed narrator watches Dunnet Landing recede from view, the novel ends with the sea, the supreme image of ontological distinctions in so much American literature. We recall that Cather called the novel “nasty and grim.” The final line might not be nasty, but it is most certainly grim: “At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the Berengaria and the future” (258). The Berengaria is the ship upon which St. Peter’s family is returning from France. Skaggs points out that “[a] Berengerian is a follower of Berenger of Tours, a heretic who denied transubstantiation—that is, who rejected the doctrine that, in the communion sacrament, commonplace substances become divine. The Berengaria returns to St. Peter those unbelieving family members who are immersed in worldly pleasures—including the pleasure of anticipating new life and birth.”38 For her part, Eve Sedgwick finds an anagram for lesbianism in Berengaria. As a less cryptic anagram, Berengaria surely also references Bergeret, the name of the professor in Anatole France’s novel *Histoire Contemporaine*. What St. Peter waits for, then, is the denial of transcendence and in its place a bad little language game, which secrets the distortion of one’s namesake into other desires and other novels, and uses that as the name of a machine that holds the human family inside itself. This, then, is a premonition of the schizoid integration of St. Peter back into that family, back into life, a condensation of distortions and self-estrangements.

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To feel the ground under one’s feet, to think one knows where one is, are the signs of a person who wakes from a dream or a spell of madness and grasps for certainties, or the sign of a person lost in a wilderness. Awaiting the incursion of the future—itself reified as a parallel vessel—and taking his bearings, St. Peter stands in no certain relationship to time, and time likewise remains in the offing. Both he and the novel end in a momentary nowhere, in void—outside the human house it does not desire, outside the impossible inhuman house it has longed for but repudiated, outside the bloomless life that is a barren substitute. The final sentence belongs to none of the zonal dispensations we have seen, and so the novel has realized a final, perhaps unexpected and unwanted self-exception, by being nowhere at all. It arrives at its own unnameable. But the unmade world here is predicated on its observation of the approaching one, and so the novel discovers, in this terminal moment of self-estrangement, its terminal condition of belonging.
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