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Jane Stanford’s Free Kindergarten at Mayfield, California, 1887. Courtesy Stanford University Archives.

Detail from the illustration in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Venice, 1499. Courtesy Stanford University Archives.


The photo used in The Wall, courtesy of Geoff Ahmann.

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

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

▸ An examination of Leland and Jane Stanford’s advocacy for the Kindergarten movement

▸ A pair of papers presenting opposing views on contemporary critical theorist Stanley Fish

▸ An article based on a paper presented at the 2004 Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs conference

▸ A chapter from a book to be published in the spring of 2006 that grew out of a 1999 MLA thesis

▸ A poem by a second-year student

▸ And essays on works by Homer, Shakespeare, James and Poe.

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

Be sure to read about this issue’s contributors, judged the best of a very good field, on the last page. We hope our choices, just in time for summer, will give you hours of enjoyable reading—and that they will inspire future contributions.
This article has been adapted from a portion of my book, The Monumental Murals of John Pugh, to be published by Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, in the Spring of 2006. It contains a modified introduction to the murals of John Pugh and the essay on Pugh’s mural at Stanford Shopping Center entitled Rue du Chat-Quipêche. My MLA thesis consisted of seven mural essays plus an introduction and short history of the trompe l’oeil mural. This mural and 25 others were added to create the book and provide a thorough examination of Pugh’s remarkable career to date. The book examines how Pugh has combined the visual trickery of the trompe l’oeil format with thought-provoking narratives to create a body of engaging and distinctive murals.

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

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

Kevin Bruce, MLA 1999
**Introduction**

Monumental adj.
1. resembling a monument, massive or imposing.
2. exceptionally great in quantity, quality, extent or degree: a monumental work.
3. of historical or enduring significance.

All three of these Webster's Dictionary definitions perfectly describe the mural art of John Pugh. They are massive and imposing, exceptionally great in both conception and execution, and are most assuredly of historical and enduring significance. But what unique characterizes make Pugh’s murals stand out from the commonplace? What imbues them with this sense of monumentality? A careful analysis of his work reveals to two significant aspects that seem to form the basis for his unqualified success as a major private and public muralist. The most obvious aspect is Pugh’s mastery of the trompe l’oeil format and his facility in maximizing its unique ability to attract an audience. The deceptive qualities of trompe l’oeil always make it engaging even in its most ordinary application. Who has not been fooled, if only for a moment, by a life-like cat painted on the side of a building, or gazed on a panoramic view of the Bay of Naples through a simulated window in a neighborhood Italian restaurant? These illusions are ex examples of commonplace trompe l’oeil murals, which are usually seen as curious pieces of perceptual trickery or decorative illusionary expanses. In the main, such works serve only to amuse or provide benign ambiance, not insights or trans- parent significance. And in fact, in most cases, they do not warrant a second glance. But the trompe l’oeil murals of John Pugh are quite another matter. They are not merely ornamental or curiously clever. They offer a rich and rewarding viewing experience. They are thought provoking, substantial, and sometimes even philosophical or spiritual. What separates the murals of John Pugh from their in- continental cousins is that he combines trompe l’oeil techniques with narrative or conceptual elements and thereby not only deceives the eye of the viewer but captures the imagination and engages the mind as well.

Within a framework of illusionary space, he cleverly orchestrates the discovery of layers of historical, social, and mythical visual commentaries that challenge the viewer with deeper levels of meaning.

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

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

Trompe l’oeil is French for “fool the eye” and refers to works of art designed to deceive the viewer, if only momentarily, into believing that the artist’s fictive representation is real. In its most narrow definition, trompe l’oeil has been limited to the creation of faux surfaces such as simulated wood or stone. This definition has been expanded to include those elements in a painting or mural that create illusionary space deceptively. It has been further expanded to encompass an “y work that includes trompe l’oeil techniques even if it contains non-illusionary levels of meaning that are more didactic or narrative than illusionary in nature.

It is this liberal, inclusive definition of trompe l’oeil that best encompasses the scope of Pugh’s works.

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

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

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

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

The initial deception of the viewer is of paramount importance to the intellectual success of a Pugh mural. First, Pugh utilizes the remarkable ability of trompe l’oeil to deceive and thereby engage the viewer. He carefully constructs elements of illusionary space by utilizing the techniques of trompe l’oeil designed to deceive the viewer into accepting a false reality, if only for a moment. The act of being fooled, and perhaps feeling a little foolish, gives the viewer a sense of inclusion and identification with the mural art: a perceptual bonding. The viewer is a participant in the deception, not unlike the sense of linkage established when one “gets” a joke. This bond, and the idea that further deceptions a wait, inexorably draws the viewer, in most cases, further into the mural. However, it could be argued that to some viewers this initial act of deception, the very process of “fooling” the eye, somehow trivializes the work. Certainly some viewers will only notice the cleverness of the deception and move on without seeking any deeper layers of meaning.

But Pugh mitigates the capriciousness of this “foolishness factor” by the thoughtful and provocative nature of his narrative elements, the quality of his artistic execution, the monumental size of most of his murals, and sometimes, by the use of sutured viewers in contemplative, almost meditative posture that enjoin the actual viewer to follow the example of their demeanor and to engage the mural art more seriously.

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

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

If a mural is merely a piece of decor ative illusion, no matter how well executed and de verly deceptive, the rapport established between viewer and mural (and by extension between the viewer and the artist)
ends at the moment when the viewer admits to the initial deception, chuckles, and moves on. The chance to imbue deeper meanings is lost and the work of art trivialized. While it can be argued that even the most simple decorative trompe l’oeil mural can be interpreted as relating some kind of story, Pugh’s intentional inclusion of layered narrative elements gives his murals a depth of complexity and viewer involvement that elevates them above the merely decorative and in fact makes them truly monumental.

A Touch of Brigadoon in Paris

Stanford Shopping Center is an upscale open-air mall owned by Stanford University and located adjacent to the campus in Palo Alto, California. The shopping center has a concierge and is considered a convenience only to be rolled up again every morning so the street may join in the activities of the shopping center. Is it rolled up only once to reveal the street and never be closed again, or is it rolled down each night for privacy only to be rolled up again every morning so the street may join in the activities of the shopping center? Is it rolled up only once every one hundred years à la Brigadoon? Only the sitewise cat who fishes knows for certain and he ain’t talking.

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

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

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

The Illusions of Reality: Trompe L’Oeil Painting

Stanford Shopping Center, Palo Alto, California, USA

Rue du Chat-qui-Pêche

Acrylic on stucco, 1988, 27 x 80 feet (8.23 x 54.9 meters), Stanford Shopping Center, Palo Alto, California, USA

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Photo credits: John Pugh and Chuck Svedalides

Notes

1 Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) 1247

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


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

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

Sophocles’s Antigone as Inspiration in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet

By Aaron Cantrell

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

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

Wisdom is by far the greatest joy...

Both works end with a too-late dash to a tomb, a furtive hope to prevent the final holocaust. In a flash of anagnorisis (Aristotle’s word for the “moment of recognition” in a tragedy) Creon speeds to Antigone’s prison, hoping against hope to free her. “Come,” he says, “I and my better judgement have come to this…I’ll set her free myself” (1232-36).

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the recognition is collective. The entire town seems to descend upon the tomb. There they find “Romeo dead and Juliet…/Warm and new kill’d” (5.3).

The final words of the Chorus in *Antigone* apply equally to both works: “Wisdom is by far the greatest joy…The mighty words of the proud are paid in full…and at long last, those blows will teach us wisdom” (1465-70). The “star cross’d lovers” in both works lack wisdom, though they excelled in passion. Both Creon and Capulet learn in the end to be wise, though Creon’s price is a good deal higher. He seems poised to follow Oedipus into oblivion at play’s end. The offending Capulets and Montagues, by stark contrast, are shown making amends. Says Capulet, “O brother Montague, give me thy hand…” To this show of love, Montague offers to raise a statue of Juliet in pure gold. Capulet follows suit and offers a like image of Romeo which he calls, “Poor sacrifices of our enmity.” The only memorial in Antigone is her unadorned tomb.

Both works warn equally against the Scylla of civic or household tyranny and the Charybdes of youthful passion. Would that Thebes had a leader with Antigone’s heart and Creon’s cunning. Would that Verona had youth with Juliet’s fire and Capulet’s sense of duty. Sophrosynei is bought with great price. To be a human being means to agonize towards its elusive capture, even as did Tantalus.

**WORKS CITED**


**NOTES**

1. Moderation, prudence.

2. Tantalus was a king who for his crimes was condemned in Hades to stand in water that receded when he tried to drink, and with fruit hanging above him that receded when he reached for it.
PITFALLS TO AVOID AT THE INTERSECTION OF LITERATURE & SCIENCE

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

To make the case that she used physics knowledgeably, I would have to demonstrate that Woolf was aware of the wave function, and that the implications of these ideas accorded with the physicist’s view of the universe. That proved to be the easy part. For my purposes, the pattern required a bit of supplementation, and that is the purpose of this essay. I worked through relativity by looking at the way in which the implications of these ideas enhanced her aims as she outlined them in her novels. The physicist’s view of science may be validly likened to literature. The purpose of these kinds of comparisons may be to bore on some of the ways in which literature and science are alike, and making tenuous comparisons between the two is not the best way to raise literature in the opinion of a physicist. In my opinion, the pattern required a bit of supplementation, and that is the purpose of this essay. I worked through relativity by looking at the way in which the implications of these ideas enhanced her aims as she outlined them in her nonfiction. I worked through relativity by looking at the new ways of understanding of light, space and time, and through quantum mechanics via the major elements of the Copenhagen interpretation, specifically complementarity, uncertainty, and the interpretation of the Schrödinger wave equation as a probability wave.

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

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

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

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

Einstein’s theory of special relativity explains the behavior of systems that are in relative motion. Relative motion has a variety of surprising consequences which become more noticeable when the movement involves speeds near the speed of light: to an observer who judges him- or herself to be stationary, moving clocks run more slowly than stationary clocks and physical matter contracts so that moving things become smaller in the direction of motion. Standing on a railway platform, we see a fast-moving train as having shorter carriages than one that is moving slower. We may think of the train as moving, but from the standpoint of p-bysics, the moving passenger may think of the train as stationary.
the scenery as moving past outside, in which case, it is the ticket office that will become smaller in the direction of motion, and the static ion clock that runs more slowly. The theory of special relativity explains why this isn’t really paradoxical.

The basics are not difficult to understand, but you do have to understand them to find valid parallels or correspondences in literary works. A recent dissertation gave as an example of the effects of relativity that someone in California can speak to someone in New York on the phone, yet their clocks read different times (Pavl 4). New York is not in physical motion relative to California. Our system of time zones is a convention adopted by the Victorians. The difference in clock readings in this case has nothing to do with Einsteinian relativity. The author doesn’t help by offering as a second example that it would take some time for a signal sent from earth to Arcturus to be received and for a reply to come back, that any sort of information takes time to cover distance has been known since at least the battle of Marathon. In a similar vein, another author suggested that there is Einsteinian relativity involved in the confusion arising from a letter sent by Vita Sackville-West, because the letter began “Today we are in Damascus” while of course, by the time Woolf read it the letter, that “today” was weeks ago (Blythe 29). If that confusion were Einsteinian, then how, before Einstein, did readers cope with any of this?

“Today” sound too simple he o f any consequence, but by accepting this ambiguity s cientists took a big step a way from their traditional position, in which they believed they could pin down everything about the universe if they only worked hard enough.

Woolf didn’t write explicitly about complementarity, but she might as well have done. It’s easy to find analogous ideas in To the Lighthouse. Lily Briscoe says there are e times when “life, from being made up of little separate incidents which are lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave” (47).

Arriving at the lighthouse, James Ramsay sees how different it looks compared to how he’s always seen it from across the bay: “So that was the lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the light-house. For nothing was simply one thing. The other lighthouse was true too” (186).

There are other instances of what could be the invocation of complementarity in the novel, the analogy feels solid, the argument is convincing, but there’s a trap here: at the time Woolf wrote To the Lighthouse, Bohr had not yet announced his principle of complementarity to scientists, much less left enough time for the notion to filter out into the wider world. Yet scholars have argued that Woolf was influenced by scientific ideas which were not published until after the book under discussion. It is simply not valid to say that Woolf “did react sensitively to quantum mechanics in her cr eation of char acter…” or w as “acutely sensitive to the new worldview” coming out of quantum mechanics, if you are investigating books published before the Solvay Conference of 1927, when the scientists involved thrashed out the implications of this new field of physics (Constein 16-17; Friedman and Donley 96). I suspect that non-scientists feel that scientific ideas describe phenomena that are t imeless, therefore it doesn’t matter that scientists understood them only after a particular date. Still, an author cannot be influenced by something that hasn’t happened yet.

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

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

Time and again in To the Lighthouse Woolf calls attention to the perceiver and gaze, often figuring a look as a ray or beam of light from the eyes. We know nothing about physical appearance most of the time, but she emphasizes eyes. Mr. Carmichael has eyes only of cat’s eyes, and Lily Briscoe’s different way of seeing the world is indicated by frequent references to her Chinese eyes.

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

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

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

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

The translation of Heisenberg’s chosen term, Unge nauigkeit, as uncertainty does not help understanding here. Indeterminacy or imprecision would be valid terms to use under discussion of the concept of doubt that allows the term to so easily be appropriated erroneously into extrascientific fields. One critic writes of a “mysterious Heisenberg principle of literary language,” although Heisenberg said nothing about literature and little about language, and the literary language discussion is not being scrutinized for inaccuracy, much less for any pairs of linked literary groupings (qtd. in Pavlish xx). In a typical claim, we’re told that “[a]s Heisenberg says, in any ‘observation’ of any ‘object’ (including but not limited to the liter ary text) we are dealing with only ladders, some long, some short. …Mathematics, biology, painting and poetry are different, however, from looking at the text through the lens colored of physics.” This is the final pitfall on my list, though I’m not certain how to char acterize it. It could be simple misapplication of the science, or it could be the result of the critics’ exploitation of the gap between the precise way in which scientists use a word and the everyday sense of the word as it’s ordinarily used. Poet and novelists bring a variety of overtones into their work by choosing words which, while not at all vague, nevertheless carry more than one sense, while the scientist’s purpose is to convey one meaning at all vague, nevertheless carry more than one sense, into their work by choosing words which, while not everyday sense of the word as it’s ordinarily used.

One thing I’ve learned from Heisenberg’s physicist’s “uncertainty principle” is that the scientist’s purpose is to convey one meaning precisely, therefore “female style of writing,” and that Septimusmıyor (Pavlish xxi, xvi). As a reader new to Modernism when I undertook this study, approaching the novel via physics opened up Woolf’s work to me, and led me to a better understanding of Modernism than I’d managed to get from traditional approaches. I would not nominate Einstein’s physics as the lens through which to view all literature, but only suggest that examining literature alongside the compelling scientific ideas of the time of its composition may be illuminating.

There are however, pitfalls for the unwary. The critic must understand when scientific discoveries can take in the whole world of human experience. We cannot use them for her own ends. The bar is set high when the question is one of influence. It is the duty of a modern novelist to express this deeper reality of which have little enough to do with reason as we understand it. Yet all methods of approaching truth are legitimate. They are when all is said and done only ladders, some long, some short. …Mathematics, biology, painting, and poetry are different, however, from looking at the text through the physicist’s — from the original structure of the work, to point of view, to symbolism — and themes — from elegy to epistemology. Clearly, the approach has its uses.

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

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

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

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

“Amontillado!”
“I have my doubts.”
“Amontillado!”
“And I must satisfy them.”
“Amontillado!”

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

Consistent with the idea of enclosure, the story creates its own universe, a sense taking root in the first paragraph. Rather than begin *in medias res*, Poe drops us into the denouement, eliding the beginning and middle in favor of a single, illusive line that tells us only of Fortunato’s transgression, not its nature or circumstances. He fails to establish time, place, or setting. The opening sentence establishes a first-person point of view, with an intimation of...
unreliability. But the second sentence jars our perspective. Rather than push narrative distance back through realized unreliability, Poe introduces an interlocutor, a “you” that never repeats but never quite leaves the story. It matters not who “you” might be; but it matters greatly that “you” exists, as a potential agent of dialogue. The next three lines establish the dimensions of the story’s space as a universe. Montresor cries, “I would be a venged,” a phrase worthy of a motto, and repeated later as such. But then he says, “this was a point definitely settled.” By whom? The passive voice, unique to this sentence in the story, reaches for the unspoken moral authority, who is decidedly not Montresor. We might even think that Montresor consulted an oracle or a priest for guidance. Not satisfied, Poe next offers a credo of vengeance, a moral code so awkwardly written that we must stop and notice it. But this is a world without detail, without particularity, without time or space, without motion, replete with generalizations and awkward language and ambiguous points of view. It has suffered kenosis, an emptying out that creates a kind of universal cask, a container ready to receive its wine.

Two paragraphs later, everything changes. Ambiguity gives way to the concrete. Absence of physical detail and sensations transforms into exquisite fine structure and palatable wet smells, bones,列表,...
nicated, and the boundary itself between mind and the outside world is not as distinct as our vocabulary of subject/object tends to make it.

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

“...Let us be gone.”

“Yes,” I said, “let us be gone.”

“For the love of God, Montresor!”

“Yes,” I said, “for the love of God!”

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

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

These are expressions of permanent separation, with permanent dysfunctions, a dysfunctions borne on the absence of communicative language.

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

1 This essay requires either that the reader have a very good memory of this story, or that the story is both recently
read and in front of the reader. If the reader does not have a copy, one may be found at http://www.literature.org/
anthology/poe-edgar-allan/amontillado.html or other sites reached through Google.
AN UNBROKEN LADDER: JANE AND LELAND STANFORD’S ADVOCACY FOR THE KINDERGARTEN MOVEMENT

By Sheryl Nonnenberg

The founding of Stanford University was the culmination of Jane and Leland Stanford’s dream of memorializing their only child and providing an educational institution for their “adopted” children of California. But the University itself was only part of a larger vision. As is indicated in Leland Stanford’s opening day speech, the Stanford’s had originally hoped to provide an educational setting that would encompass early childhood curriculum and provide a sense of social obligation, and to understand how this movement, with its emphasis on educational reform, played a crucial role in the establishment of this social/educational reform movement in San Francisco. To a large extent, the university’s financial support and advocacy for the kindergarten movement played a crucial role in the establishment of this social/educational reform movement in San Francisco.

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

Kindergarten (literally “child gardening”) was the invention of a German educator, Friedrich Froebel, in the mid-1830s. Froebel’s theories about early childhood education were largely shaped by his own experience as a child in Weimar, Germany. Froebel’s father was a strict Lutheran minister who paid little attention to his son. His mother died when he was a baby, and although his father quickly remarried, Froebel never enjoyed a close relationship with his stepmother. This lack of maternal care and affection had an enormous impact on Froebel’s kindergarten philosophies, which extol the virtues of women as spiritual leaders and the importance of love and nature. As a child, he spent many hours alone in the wooded countryside near his home. He developed an interest in botany, which eventually led him to serve as an apprentice to a woodsman in the Thuringer forest. Although he abandoned a career in forestry in order to become an educator, his observations on the harmony and inter-connectedness of all things in nature had a profound impact on his kindergarten ideals. For Froebel, forced lessons on duty, morality, and religion were useless; all of these concepts were best learned by observing nature. Physical play, out of doors, was a key element in the successful kindergarten ideals. For Froebel, forced lessons on duty, morality, and religion were useless; all of these concepts were best learned by observing nature. Physical play, out of doors, was a key element in the successful kindergarten ideals. Froebel believed that teaching was a socially-acceptable profession, and that teaching was a socially-acceptable profession.


tangents
... — fewer jails later." 5 So, not only was as kindergarten a revolution in education reform, but it was also a social reform movement, and one that we as eagerly received in San Fr ancisco — a city with one of the largest immigrant populations in the country.

During and following the Gold Rush, San Francisco was a city where fortunes were easily won and lost. But by the 1870s and 1880s, clearly delineated levels of society were being established. There were, of course, people of great wealth, like Jane and Leland Stanford, whose fortune was made via commerce and the transcontinental railroad. On the other end of the spectrum were the residents of the South of Market area; Irish, German and English immigrants who worked as tradesmen and craftsmen. According to Carol Roland, who contextualized San Francisco society in the late 19th century, wealthy women in San Francisco flocked to popular causes like social welfare and education for different reasons. May Crocker turned towards the solvency of the university and her husband, while Jane turned to raising money for the public welfare, which “was the best thing you ever did in your life.” After Leland Stanford’s death in 1884, Cooper suggested that Jane fund a kindergarten as a memorial to her son. Soon, there were a total of eight kindergarten in San Francisco and two in “the country” (Menlo Park and Mayfield). In 1885, Jane was named honorary president of the Golden Gate Kindergarten Association.

The kindergartens quickly became a social reform movement, with its emphasis on the joy of learning, was a natural outlet for the Stanfords. No doubt they would have agreed wholeheartedly with Friedrich Froebel’s assessment, “A happy childhood is an unspeakably precious memory.”

The kindergartens were run by women. Many of them were very successful in the promotion and funding of the movement, like their peers on the East Coast, wealthy women in San Francisco flocked to popular causes like social welfare and education for different reasons. The ideals of kindergartens were that each one should be free to climb...”8

For Jane Stanford, the ideals of kindergarten were totally in keeping with her fervent beliefs in a spiritual, temperate lifestyle with an emphasis on service to man and God. In addition, the strong role of women in the kindergarten movement coalesced with Jane’s opinions about the importance of women achieving an education, while holding motherhood as the ideal occupation. Properly trained kindergarten teachers were, in fact, surrogate mothers; they provided care, nurture and imparted spiritual and moral lessons.

It comprised the main part of the organization’s operating budget and also included a trust fund that lasted until 1993. Thanks to the largesse of the Stanfords, the Association was the largest privately financed kindergarten system in the country. By a time when there were a plethora of social causes (from temperance leagues to the suffrage movement) begging for funding, what was it about the kindergarten movement that so inspired Jane and Leland Stanford? The answer lies in both highly personal and philosophical motivations. For Leland Stanford, kindergarten ideals were completely in accord with his own philosophy about education. Ironically, Leland Junior did not attend school with other children, but instead had a number of private tutors throughout his life. There was, however, a kindergarten teacher who had a lasting impact on the young boy. In The Educational Ideas of Leland Stanford, David Starr Jordan recounts a story told by Leland Stanford in which he tells of young Leland’s study with a kindergarten teacher named Miss Mar y Frazer McDonald. Miss McDonald “taught the stories of nature to his son and to other children in a simple, natural way, had a great influence on his mind, as showing that rational knowledge could be made as attractive as the conventional mythology of childhood.” Stanford was evidently so impressed with the kindergarten system of education that he applied it with “signal success” to the training of his trotting horses. Jordan goes on to explain that Leland Stanford believed strongly in an educational system that formed “...an unbroken ladder from the kindergarten to the highest university, a ladder that each one should be free to climb.”

For Jane Stanford, the ideals of kindergarten were totally in keeping with her fervent beliefs in a spiritual, temperate lifestyle with an emphasis on service to man and God. In addition, the strong role of women in the kindergarten movement coalesced with Jane’s opinions about the importance of women achieving an education, while holding motherhood as the ideal occupation. Properly trained kindergarten teachers were, in fact, surrogate mothers; they provided care, nurture and imparted spiritual and moral lessons. Helen Smith relates that the kindergarten day began with washing up, being given a clean apron and handkerchief, and included instruction about religion, often the first exposure to God for most of the child. In a heartwarming anecdote about a young boy who attended a Stanford Free Kindergarten and whose transformation from street urchin to prayerful school boy had such an impact on his alcoholic father that he resolved to change his ways, Jane responded to the story, saying, “That one instance has repaid me for all I have done.”

Incidents like this, and Sarah Cooper’s unsuccessful study revealing that there were no kindergarten graduates in reform schools or prisons, dearly served as reinforcement for the Stanford’s philanthropy. But there was also, no doubt, the factor of memorializing their dear son in such a visible, life-altering manner. After Leland Senior’s death, Jane’s attentions turned towards the solvency of the university and her involvement with the kindergartens dwindled.

Ironically, the fact that the kindergartens in San Francisco were privately funded proved to be a detri- ment in the long run. By 1895, kindergarten (a revised version of Froebel’s original idea) was integrated into the American public school system and supported by tax dollars. The kindergartens in San Fr ancisco had not been folded into the public school system, and by the turn of the century only 13 remained in operation. After Sarah Cooper’s death in 1897, the loss of her vision and fund-raising acumen resulted in few donations to the GKG. Additionally, competition from other social causes that the elite could support meant Stanford dollars were not available for the kindergartens. Also, the kindergartens originally begun by y Wiggins and Cooper, with their strong emphasis on social t reform, became an anachronism as the national focus turned towards educational reform, with some of Froebel’s child-centered philosophies being adopted up and into the primary grades.

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

NOTES
2 Brosierman, 93.
4 Carol Roland, The California Kindergarten Movement: A Study in Class and Social Feminism.
5 Helen Smith, Our Woman’s Work, 1891.
6 Smith.
8 Jordan, 20.
9 Smith.
10 Wiggins, 24.
Henny James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) offers a highly refracted, yet revealing lens for examining the concept of self. A work of hyper-consciousness, it is grounded in precise impressions of individual moments or, as James noted, “a crystalline record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities” (Preface 39). In this record, a ghost story that is still one of James’s most popular and widely read tales, one can also detect traces of another spirit-like presence, an awareness of the modern Western philosophies of consciousness from Kant to Freud.

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

The effect is like looking in a mirror. Unlike a neutral, inanimate mirror, however, Hegel’s self-reflecting other has its own private, subjective separateness: “it is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion of itself from everything else…[and in] its being-for-self, it is an individual” (94). The implication of this state of pure subjectivity forms the basis of the Hegelian view of history. Each separate self, while wanting the self and other appear.

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

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

At the top of the household order, by virtue of his wealth, his sex, and his position as the head of what remains of his little nephew and niece’s family hierarchy, is the governess’s employer, also nameless, only known as “the uncle.” The uncle is a remote, yet all-powerful, figure who is able to raise and lower the status of all the others. He lives far away in the city; a dashing, handsome, rich, worldly gentleman, so fabulous to the much less of the other? In this context, the mirror has become a kaleidoscope. With each turn, new images of self and other appear.
Miles and Flora, the orphaned nephew and niece, occupy a space at once above and below the governess. As children, they must obey the adults. But as members of a higher class, it is only a matter of time before they rise above their teacher.

Just below the governess in the domestic hierarchy is Mrs. Grose. Formerly maid to the uncle’s mother, Mrs. Grose has guarded the door for all the go verness’s actions. She is the individual whose constant presence, by virtue of her constant presence, is the linchpin of household order. She is, nonetheless, “belo stairs only” (150). At the bottom are “the others,” servants virtually invisible and indistinguishable in the narrative. In contrast to the uncle who is present in his absence, and the housekeeper, who is present in her presence, they are absent in their presence.

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

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

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

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

The governess believes Mrs. Grose to be so naïvely honest as to be incapable of any Nietzschean act of untruth. To the governess, the housekeeper, like the full-length mirror in her room at Bly, reflects the teacher’s image flattering whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (accor ding to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the governess) her own need for her better: “I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my image flatteringly whole, clear, and true. Mrs. Grose clearly sees and accepts (according to the gov...
Her unease increases when Miles and Flora begin to relentlessly question the circumstances of the governess’s life before coming to Bly. Ceaselessly probing the depths of her memory, the children were eventually, “in possession of e verything that had e ver happened to me” (211). Her situation has been reversed, instead of becoming “rich” both in the terms of her relationship with the children and the status afforded by her position at Bly, the governess has been impoverished. By bringing to light all the details of her life as a poor parson’s daughter, the children have objectified their teacher to the point where it is clear that she is no longer fit for her job.

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

With little imagination of her own and lacking reverence of wealth or status, the governess has been used up by Miles or, in the Hegelian sense, destroyed by the self’s recognizing other. She is indeed alone. Nonetheless, she still controls the boy’s fate. In the final scene, the governess tells the boy, “I have” you and in the clutchings of her smothering embrace, Miles dies, his heart having been “dispossessed” (264, 262) Whether he dies from fright or asphyxiation, the frustrated reader will never know. In any case, the governess received the ultimate consideration—Miles is no longer an obstruction between her and the uncle.

Possession, of course, has another, highly resonant, connotation. Whether the ghosts in the story are “real” or hallucinations, their psychic significance bears great weight in relation to the idea in The Turn of the Screw: Be the you unnatural or supernaturally, ghosts inhabit entity self and are thus an apt metaphor for an unstable sense of self. Neither quite alive nor fully dead, ghosts defy reason while musing and exaggerating the disquieting questions of consciousness and appearance. Even more discomforting, ghosts are pure experience, they don’t explain, they just are. Witnesses must in variably create for themselves the story behind their appearance. In this way ghosts are mirror-like, the element of self-reflection always in play.

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

Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not (181). …how my equilibrium depended on the success of rigid will, the will to shut my eyes as tight as possible to the truth that what I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature. I could only get on at all by taking ‘nature’ into my confidence and my account, by treating my monstrosity of a task as a push in a direction unusual, of course, and unpleasant, but demanding after all, for a fair front, only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue. No attempt, nonetheless, could well require more tact than just this attempt to supply, one’s self, all of nature (201-53).

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

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

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

The key link between hero and singer occurs in an epic simile — the distinctive form of extended metaphor originating with Homer — comparing the respective instruments of warrior and bard. The operative scene, from Book 21, is a famous one. Odysseus, after an absence of almost twenty years, has returned home in disguise to find suitors besieging his wife Penelope who, ostensibly unaware of her husband's presence, has issued the challenge of the bow: whoever can string Odysseus's hunting bow and make the difficult shot through twelve axes will earn her hand in marriage. The suitors, having tried and failed to even string the great bow, now challenge of the bow: whoever can string Odysseus's hunting bow and make the difficult shot through twelve axes will earn her hand in marriage. The suitors, having tried and failed to even string the great bow, now challenge the hero enacts his own homecoming celebration, Homer succeeds in reflexively casting a glorious light on himself and his own poetic art.

Homer strategically places the musical simile at the center of a passage that is itself rich in connections of auditory elements to meaning. As Odysseus, still disguised as the old beggar, scorns the glancing iron incongruities contained in the taunts themselves. One suitor mockingly perplexed by the old man perhaps has bow like this one "stored in his house" (21.445), not yet realizing that the lord of this house (which is, of course, "his house") is in fact home to reclaim what belongs to him. Another suitor exclaims, "Look how he twists and turns it in his hands!" (21.447), not only invoking the epic's first epithet (Book 1, line 1's polytropos, "man of twists and turns") for the hero Odysseus, but also providing a grimly ironic preview of the virtuoso case (21.456) with which the hero will soon string the instrument of the suitors' own destruction. A final "cocksure lord" derisively wishes the old man good luck (21.449) immediately before the full extent of the "virtuoso ease" (21.456) immediately before the full extent of the good fortune and divine will favoring Odysseus is revealed with ultimate force and clarity.

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

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

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

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

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

A song of gods and heroes accompanies a festive meal, of course—"the ringing lyre is [the friend of] the feasts" (17.296-297), we are told — and Homer makes clear that Odysseus's metaphorical song of revenge also occurs in the context of a figurative feast. Now that the featur ed instrument has been tuned, Odysseus prepares to play host to his own homecoming banquet. The bowstring's clarion call and heaven's fateful thunder combine to serve as a dinner summons, commanding the radiant attention of the suitors, the feast's self-invented guests. Odysseus's first action following this call is to pick up a lone arrow, low lying, fittingly enough, "bare on the boar's teeth" (21.464), that is, on the banquet table. This arrow, unique in being unsharpened and ready at hand, serves a symbolic function as the means by which Odysseus, unique among men, may complete the test of the bow and thereby signal that he alone is worthy to host the feast to come. Just before Odysseus notches the arrow taken...
from the dining table, the feasting context is made even more explicit: “the rest [of the arrows] still bristled deep inside the quiver,/ soon to be tasted by all the feasters ther e” (21.465-466). As in the lyre simile, Homer again plants a seed reminding us that the test of the bow is a preview encapsulating the elements of the song and feast that Odysseus will enact in the subsequent battle. If the bowstring’s note serves as the prelude to the heroic song soon to be carried out, Homer makes it clear that the single arrow with which Odysseus proves himself is a foretaste of the main course at the banquet to come.

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

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

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

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

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The inadequacy of Fish’s theory creates a cloud over all his ideas...
following Descartes. By the eighteenth century, in fact, each of the two types of arguments offered by Fish were already old news, in Germany, France, England, Holland, America, and elsewhere. The human mind imposes meaning onto the world. The world imposes meaning onto the human mind.

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

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

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

But Fish has spent many pithy, articulate pages convincing us that the language in the world means nothing unless we impose meaning onto it ourselves. How can the Fishian person during this formative time impose meaning onto language by him/herself? He/she has never been supplied with the cultural ally-generated interpretation rules to do so, and it is not clear how he/she could, for the first time, be given such rules. Any “first” attempt by the culture to provide these rules must be substantially language-based, and our young person has no way of ingesting and understanding such language. If our young person is capable of imposing meaning onto such “first” rules, it must mean that there were earlier interpretation rules already in place, preexisting the incoming “first” interpretation rules. But these “earlier” rules face the same problem as the now-misnamed “first” rules faced — they must have been provided by a culture, and there must be “even earlier” rules in place to interpret them, and so forth.

This is circular reasoning; our culture trains us using language to be able to make meaning, then we make the meaning of the language used to train us. Our ability to interpret must be informed by an underlying culture rule, but each cultural rule requires a pre-existing ability to interpret.

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

Let us look at the first sort of modification. Fish could say that, at some point in the human mind has been trained to have any structure that would allow it to impose anything on anything. He must admit the existence of a mechanism for this, either resulting from some early externally meaningful process or from a DNA-borne prior interpretive ability. Refusal to do either leaves him with a flawed, poorly-reasoned proposal. The circular-reasoning problem, in which any cultural “first” language would require an earlier language already in place, in or der that the “first” language’s meaning could result from human-imposed interpretation onto the world, cannot be resolved without some modification of his original theory.

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

WORKS CITED
Stanley Fish is widely considered to be one of the most original and important literary theorists in contemporary arts and letters. In spite of this fact (or perhaps because of it) he is a favorite target of just about anyone who has a bone to pick with American culture. Often lumped under the amorphous category “postmodernist,” a label Richard Rorty has described as “the worst thing one intellectual can call another,” Fish has proven to be especially loathsome to the virtue-obsessed guardians of morality on the American right. These right wing critics view Fish as a truth-hating nihilist on a mission to spread a set of “very dangerous ideas” including one critic has described as “radical cultural relativism, nonjudgmentalism, and a postmodern conviction that there are no moral norms or truths worth defending” (Leo). In this view Fish is a cynical and unprincipled sophist who makes his living chipping away at our sacred foundations of truth, virtue, and justice—ideas threatened on every side by politically correct multiculturalists, uppity feminists, and other anti-American crusaders. The disease afflicting our nation, they believe, is cultural relativism and justice—that is threatened on every side by political correctness, and that to stanley Fish of being “poorly thought through,” he does so within a long tradition of Fish-baiters whose net is very wide indeed. It is clear that Mason Tobak is no fan of Fish and that he has plenty of company, but on what grounds does he criticize Fish so vehemently? The set of claims and counter claims in Tobak’s review of Is There a Text in This Class? can be tricky to untangle but to sum up, the following is a reconstruction of his argument:

1. Tobak claims that Fish claims that language on its own is absolutely meaningless, and that words acquire meaning only after someone receives them and assigns them a meaning. Words mean nothing on their own, and “the reader determines meaning absolutely and completely,” according to Tobak’s reading of Fish.

2. Each reader is a member of an “interpretive community” that provides the rules for what counts as an acceptable interpretive act and what does not, thereby constraining the total universe of possible interpretations for any given sentence.

3. Knowing the rules of one’s interpretive community is a necessary pre-condition for being able to assign meaning to language. Interpretation is therefore a two-step process for Tobak’s version of Fish: first one receives language, and then one assigns meaning to it according to the rules one has learned from the interpretive community.

4. The clincher: If one cannot understand language without a set of interpretive rules to tell you how to decipher the meaning of words and sentences, it would be impossible to learn the interpretive rules in the first place. That is because in order to learn them, these rules would have to be communicated linguistically but if interpretive rules are not already in place, the sentences that convey these rules would be unintelligible. Since Fish does not describe how these interpretive rules are communicated, or why communicating them is not possible according to his own argument, Fish’s putatively left-wing credentials calling him an “intellectual sophomoric.”

5. Therefore, Stanley Fish is wrong and intellectually sophomoric. At first glance this critique of Fish is interesting and provocative. But because it rests on a misapprehension of Fish’s claims, Tobak’s argument is quickly revealed to be toothless. Tobak’s version of Fish holds that all interpretive acts consist of two steps: first, you receive the words that are being communicated (utterances, poems, novels, letters, etc.) and second, you assign meaning to them according to a received set of interpretive rules. His critique rests entirely on this point—Fish’s failure, Tobak claims, is that his theory of interpretive acts in involves a two-stage process that cannot account for how its own rules could possibly come into existence.

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

[No one is] free to confere on an utterance any meaning he likes. Indeed, “confer” is exactly the wrong word because it implies a two-stage procedure in which a reader or hearer first scrutinizes an utterance and then gives it a meaning. The argument of the preceding pages can be reduced to the assertion that there is no such first stage, that one learns an utterance within, and not as preliminary to determining, a knowledge of its purpose and concern, and that to so hear it is all easy to have assigned it a shape and given it a meaning. In other words, the problem of how meaning is determined is only a problem if there is a point at which its determination has not yet been made, and I am saying that there is no such point. Fish insists that because we ords are communicated within a context that defines the interpretive act in advance, by the time words reach their destination the interpretive community has already done its work. The hearer doesn’t learn the interpretive community’s rules and then apply those rules to language in order to determine which of all possible interpretive acts is correct. The hearer hears language from within an interpretive community, which is what defines
the appropriate interpretation before the message even reaches its destination. When the message does reach the hearer, the determination of meaning has already occurred—outside the mind of the hearer—by filtering words through a context that gives them shape and meaning.

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

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

After Tobak’s argument vanishes into smoke, two intersecting questions remain. First, what is Fish’s position? And second, how could Tobak, an intelligent and conscientious critic, so misinterpret an argument that is so plainly stated in the text? The most inter esting feature of these two questions, which anyone familiar with Fish’s work will recognize, is that both are ultimately the same question.

The main point of Fish’s essays in Is There a Text in this Class? is that The Meaning of a text (or utterance, or sentence) is not a fixed entity that can be captured ed or communicated in any form that is so stable and universal that it will always mean the same thing to everyone, everywhere, for ever. The meaning of a given text emerges only after it has been filtered ed through a specific situation and r eceived by a reader who is embedded in that situation. Because language is always situational, it is a mistake to think that an utterance or text has the ability to transcend its situation to capture some greater universal and unchanging message that is tied, as with a golden cord, to the things at different times, but that doesn’t mean any text can mean anything at any time. Within a specific time and place and community, the meaning of a text is fixed. Because humans always exist within a specific time and place and community, the objective meaning of a text is always there and readily available to us. It is only when we use the word “objective” to mean something like “universal” or “irreducible” or “forever” that we get into trouble. When situations change, so do the meanings we are able to derive from words and texts. What makes a poem a poem is not something “in the text” that is scientifically identifiable for all to see if the y will only look closely enough. What makes a poem a poem is the set of interpretive assumptions that attend it—assumptions like “this piece of text is a poem.”

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