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William Carlos Williams and John Dewey on the Public, its Problems, and its Poetry

If I could convince myself or have anyone else convince me that I were merely following in the steps of Dewey, I'd vomit and quit – at any time. But for the moment I don't believe it – the poetry is offered not too confidently as proof (Williams, *Selected Letters* 138).

The starting point of this essay is to take up Williams' offer and inquire into the relation between Dewey's pragmatism and Williams' poetry. This is not done to spite Williams, on the contrary: I will confidently assume that his poetry, by virtue of being poetry, does not simply follow or merely illustrate philosophical ideas. I take Williams' irritated response to Kenneth Burke, who noted an indebtedness to Dewey upon reading *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, to suggest that the independence of his imagination is most noticeable in those texts in which we are to pay attention to their design, to the placement of words on the page. At the same time, Williams himself seems to suspect what a number of recent studies confirm, namely the similarities of his ideas to those of John Dewey. According to critics such as Marsh, Ickstadt, and most recently John Beck, these similarities are most apparent in Williams' essays, novels, and long poems, particularly in *Paterson*.¹ Both men shared the diagnosis that the compartmentalization of knowledge into science, philosophy, and art and the notion that these are

¹ See William J. Gavin, "How Things Go Wrong in Our Experience: John Dewey vs. Franz Kafka vs. William Carlos Williams," *Transactions of the Charles Sanders Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 35.1 (1999), and Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity. Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998) 164–216. Gavin reads "Paterson" to complement Dewey, while Marsh's chapter on "Dewey, Williams, and the Democratic Poem" looks at "Paterson" and also at "The Wanderer." Heinz Ickstadt points to the "affinity of Williams's aesthetic convictions with the tenets of American pragmatism" in a footnote in an article on Williams as a critic (Ickstadt, "Williams as Critic" 92) and to the pervading influence of Dewey on Williams, Waldo Frank, and Hart Crane in Heinz Ickstadt, "The (Re)Construction of an American Cultural Identity in Literary Modernism," *Negotiations of America's National Identity*, ed. Roland Hagenbüchle and Josef Raab, vol. II (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000) 222. The most extensive study in this field is certainly John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center. William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

remote from and without immediate bearing upon the experiences of common people are central problems of modern life. Furthermore, both believed that poetry has an important public role as acts of imagination that can transform society. Significantly, both men pointed to the importance of form as an aspect of art crucial in shaping the materials of life in ways that allow for aesthetic experience. And here, I think, still lies an unanswered challenge of Williams' offer: His case is representative in that most cultural analyses still draw on prose or even more narrowly, narrative texts, as though these provide privileged access to social and historical phenomena. Here, problems of representation often dominate over problems of form, and the question of literariness is hardly approached.² Despite the fact that cultural studies is often understood as a response to the assumed shortcomings of the New Criticism, its practices inadvertently affirm the earlier assumption that poetry as an epitome of the literary resides in a separate realm; "cultural work" is mainly done by the novel. If it can be shown that the cultural significance of a text may well reside in its design, as Williams and Dewey assumed, this may not only reconcile poetry to cultural studies and literary analysis to cultural theory, but also prompt a reconsideration of the supposedly more direct connection of representation and culture in narrative texts. The challenge then, is to examine whether Williams' short poems bear out an analysis to both, design and cultural theory. To see how they fare in a dialogue with Dewey's and Williams' social and aesthetic thought should be relevant to the current debate on the role of the literary in cultural studies.

I will begin with "Tract" as an early poem from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) that seems to enunciate explicitly Williams' rejection of conventional symbols as divorcing people from reality and each other.³ With a rude, impatient voice and amidst a lot of swearing a group of townspeople are told to simplify their pretentious funeral ritual. They ought to reevaluate their conventions not with regard to the deceased but with regard to the rest of the community. To the shrewd eyes of the poet, speaking for the bystanders, the white or black polish of the hearse, its gilt wheels, glass, and upholstery, the hot house flowers, and the conspicuousness of a driver signify social status

² For a critical assessment of cultural studies along those lines see Winfried Fluck, "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Louis Freitas Caton, Emory Elliott, and Jeffrey Rhyne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Heinz Ickstadt, "Towards a Pluralist Aesthetics" in the same volume, and, with regard to poetry, Joseph Harrington, "Why American Poetry Is Not American Literature," *American Literary History* 8.3 (1996) and Marjorie Perloff, "In Defense of Poetry. Put the literature back into literary studies," *Boston Review* 24.6 (1999).

³ All poems are quoted from William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, vol. 1: 1909-1939 (New York: New Directions, 1986). The edition is henceforth abbreviated as *CP*.

and wealth (Frail 116-20); they also serve to "shut grief in" and to cover up death - they are means of separation. In the poem's implicit argument, to uncover death and to "sit openly -/to the weather as to grief" (*CP* 74) is also to reinforce an awareness of sharing basic emotions and thus to acknowledge the mourners' and the bystanders' common humanity; this will be brought about by a reflection and subsequent change of a common ritual and its symbols performed under the guidance of the artist.

The egalitarian thrust of the poem is complicated by its didacticism and the speaker's position. To Ron Loewinsohn, poems like "Tract" "are ostensibly addressed to his townspeople, but in these poems the speaker is obviously more concerned with his *readers*, whom he seems to imagine sitting behind him on the dais as he holds forth. These readers form an audience far more sophisticated than his townspeople" (Loewinsohn 369). Indeed, the poem is quite demanding in its juxtaposition of a tract, a poem, and a speech. The title suggests a form of written public address, a pamphlet on a communal ritual that involves religious and political concerns. A poet writing a tract to teach his townspeople assumes a superior didactic role that is already anachronistic in 1917. His actual teaching then is quite different. The frequent pauses, the exclamations, the cursing, the questions, and the after-thoughts imitate a speech that is deliberately secular and anti-sentimental, even offensive, given the occasion of a funeral. It may be considered a dramatic monologue, but one in which we are not asked to question or unmask the speaker but to learn about the implied listeners, the townspeople. As a poem then, this text is rather unconventional and thus, as far as its readers are concerned, preaches to the converted at the cost of the townspeople.

The poem seems to illustrate what John Beck criticizes as a problem of democratic art and of Williams' and Dewey's work as cultural critics. "If the mass of the population is unable, because of undemocratic conditions, to speak for itself, who can do so without the emergence of a patrician elite?" (Beck 6) As for democratic poetry, the question becomes whether it ascends "above the homogeneity of the mass in order to save itself, or descend[s] to earth in order to redeem society?"

Williams, it could be said, tries to do both, which entails a rather complex maneuvering of positions. He claims common speech as the ground for a democratic poetry, but common speech rendered as poetry and, egalitarianism aside, often "difficult" poetry. So Williams counters by arguing that the mass must learn how to gain access to the materials contained in this difficulty. But how? By learning how to read. And who will teach this skill? The democratic poet. So it goes on, the poet stepping alternately inside and then outside society, accepting and then denying responsibility, willing and then fearful of making contact with that which makes up the substance of the reality in which the poem is supposed to reside (Beck 7).

The desire for a position both inside and outside is the key target of Beck's criticism of both Dewey and Williams. He argues that any authority to critique democracy must somehow assume a position "outside" which would also allow for a more thorough analysis and a call for radical change. However, "the fact is that Williams's and Dewey's pragmatic acceptance of the contingency of art and life means that there can be no stepping outside the fabric of existing conditions" (Beck 40). All change and invention has its starting point in what is already there – but when "there is no known vantage point from which to survey society – no cultural high ground – how is cultural criticism possible?" (Beck 45) Whatever the poem has to offer in this debate must surely hinge upon the dramatic situation created and the position of the speaker therein as well as the implied notion of the relation of the poet to his audience. Here is the beginning of the poem:

I will teach you my townspeople
 how to perform a funeral –
 for you have it over a troop
 of artists –
 unless one should scour the world –
 you have the ground sense necessary.

See! The hearse leads.
 I begin with a design for a hearse. (CP 72)

Like the poem "To a Solitary Disciple," "Tract" is ostensibly didactic about a question of design and presents its teaching as an ongoing activity.⁴ The commands "See!" or "Knock the glass out!" and "Bring him down – bring him down!" (CP 74) create a rebellious spirit that seems to involve direct, even violent action, but as we realize after the last line of the poem, these are not physical but imaginative acts: what the poem goes through is a kind of rehearsal for the performance that is to begin only after the poem ends. The speaker therefore addresses the mourning citizens as a stage manager would address his troop of actors, that is, as artists. They are about to perform before a very critical audience, namely their fellow citizens, who look as easily through vain pretensions as they look through the glass of the hearse: "Is it for the dead/to look out or for us to see/the flowers or the lack of them –/or what?" (CP 73) In his identification with the rest of town as audience lies the authority of the speaker. Having introduced himself as artist and critic, he is both designing and considering the design with regard to its effect and meaning, he is both making and reflecting, and this is what he is teaching his

⁴ For an interpretation of "To a Solitary Disciple" along these lines see Alan Ostrom, *The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966) 3–20.

townspeople as fellow artists. His revisions, sometimes begun even within the same line, mark the awareness of the symbolic meaning of the design, and this awareness is more significant than what is actually done. For whether there are wheels or no wheels, "flowers or the lack of them," whether the townspeople walk or sit is not as important as that the choice is consciously made; the question is: "my townspeople what are you thinking of?" (CP 73)

A communal ritual needs to be designed in a process in which the imagination selects the details, examines them as to their effects, modifies or dismisses them, and places them into an order – as one would design a work of art. This process is governed by what is to be expressed or rather: the expression is the adequate design. There is no illusion about escaping symbols and performance altogether; in "Go with some show/of inconvenience; sit openly –" (CP 74) the line-break and internal rhyme emphasize that this is no return to authentic and direct expression. Yet those who walk or sit openly will be neither protected from the weather nor from the glances of the bystanders and in that sense the different performance does make a difference. This is also what the reader learns in the course of the poem, which revises certain key words such as "ground" or "weather." Ground is first introduced in "ground sense," (CP 72) which one may read as a synonym for common sense. In the discussion of wheels it is stripped of this abstraction as it is firmly placed underneath the wheels or the dray. Next it is specified as "pebbles and dirt and what not" – the literal ground everyone is destined for. Likewise, the motive of "weather," running through the poem, is first introduced by "weathered" as an antonym to "polished." In the second stanza "rain and snow" are brought together with "pebbles and dirt" – both motives are now particularized to become reminders of natural forces we cannot escape and the elements we return to (CP 73). The sheltered "hot house flowers," repeating the idea of housing the dead behind glass, are therefore entirely misplaced. The last stanza likens the weather to grief as a transforming emotion one might want to hide, but whose traces will show on a face as on a weathered surface. Thus vaguely figural meanings are forced to confront their literal "ground" before they are recharged with symbolic meaning. As in "To a Solitary Disciple" the point is not to avoid symbols and metaphors altogether, but to use them only after their concrete physical reality has been established. This reality will be the basis for a better performance: Provided with "ground sense," the townspeople will perform a funeral procession with a strong emphasis on openness and the horizontal because they are sensitive to the meaning of a funeral for the secular relations among each other and to natural forces rather than the vertical relation to God or the afterlife.

With its communal and didactic aspects, the poem attempts to resume the integral religious and political role a poet once held in funeral rituals,

particularly in New England. His elegy on the deceased would express the grief of the community and, through praise or exhortation, remind it of its values. "Tract," however, reveals the values of the community through a script of a dramatic situation. The poem teaches neither by reasoning nor by example but allows the reader to witness a performance or, more precisely, the rehearsal for one. As dramatic monologue the poem invites our identification with either the speaker or the audience, but also incites doubts about the appropriateness of that identification, as Loewinsohn's reading shows. It prompts us to reassess the role of the speaker, of his addressed audience the townspeople, and then also of *their* audience. Reading the poem requires a revision of attitude that resembles that of the townspeople as actors. To be "inside" or "outside" is therefore a question of awareness and critical distance. Any artist in the process of creating is also his first critic when he revises and improves his design. Any community may only gain when it understands its activities as artistic in this sense, for only thus will it gain consciousness of itself as a whole. This the readers of the poet may learn by practicing different levels of critical distance to the speaker, the townspeople, and the audience. And in its revision of "weather" or "ground," the poem itself enacts a kind of common ritual bringing about a new awareness of words.

The poem provides the impetus to examine the terms Beck uses to criticize pragmatist aesthetics and politics. He uses "inside" and "outside" as spatial terms, whose opposition metaphorically describes an untenable critical position. The idea to be simultaneously inside and outside echoes Whitman's claims to be both, body and soul, subject and object, to go outward to the multitude of people and yet to contain everything within. But while paradox and contradiction may make for good poetry it still results in sloppy criticism, Beck implies with his frequent rhetorical questions to Dewey and Williams (Beck 11 and 31). "Tract," however, allows us to understand "inside" and "outside" not as spatial positions but as performative acts. To be inside is to make or perform, possibly in interaction with others, or for the reader to identify with the audience as addressee or with the superior role of the speaker. To be outside is to reflect about the performance, of looking at it as through the eyes of others, that is, critically. In making a work of art, doing and reflecting can hardly be distinguished; creation and critique are part of the same process, one leading to the other to improve the design. To be inside and outside characterizes an aesthetic attitude that should be carried into society to enhance awareness of its habits and to change them.⁵ To regard a social ritual as a work of art consciously per-

⁵ Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's theory of reception and J.A. Appleyard's psychology of reading, Winfried Fluck describes the aesthetic attitude towards fiction as a sort of

formed brings about a transformation; it is an immanent change, yet the appeal for it is aimed at an audience with an awareness seemingly beyond the addressees, but "ready" for it. "We" as the critical audience of the performing townspeople will only be brought together with them through an increased awareness of our social practices. This has a reflexive effect upon the practices themselves, transforming them so that they may become a better expression of that shared awareness. The poet as artist and critic will remake life in and through art by creating and reflecting a consciousness of communal life.

The poem's emphasis on art as performative act, on an aesthetic attitude not only towards artistic objects but towards life, and the idea that carrying art into life will contribute to a more democratic community both foreshadows and echoes some of Dewey's central tenets of philosophical thought.⁶ More significantly, the poem's final suggestion that a more conscious communal life will not affect the economic divisions in town, suddenly invites a critical revision of the implied political theory – after all, the poem itself is not a philosophical proposition but a "rehearsal" of one, made ten years after "Tract": "The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy." (Dewey, *Public* 149)

This claim from Dewey's key work on democratic theory follows upon a reevaluation of major philosophical terms in an effort to overcome the dualisms of traditional philosophy, nothing less than a *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, as one of his books proclaims. The tight interaction of making and reflecting, of active doing and seemingly passive perception and thought provides the starting point of this philosophical endeavor that can be found in early essays such as "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) or, nearer to our concerns with poetry, in "Emerson – The Philosopher of Democracy." (1903) According to Herwig Friedl, the essay prepares the ground for Dewey's own philosophical ideas and "a new way of conceiving the relationship of literature and philosophy" as Dewey suggests a

role-playing. Since the passage also uses the image of being inside and outside, I quote it at length: "Taking an aesthetic attitude thus becomes the source of non-identity, and it is this non-identity, in turn, which can be seen as a source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us, for example, to be inside and outside of a character at the same time. We can look at ourselves from the outside and, in doing so, create another, more expressive version of ourselves" (Fluck, "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," 90).

⁶ The shift in theory from the artistic object to an aesthetic attitude is one also made by the Formalists around the same time. For the similarities between Dewey and especially Mukařovský, see the essays by Fluck and Ickstadt in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* and Astrid Franke, "Individualism versus Integration? Art and Society in Dewey and Mukařovský." *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck, vol. 15 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999).

vital relation between the poetic in the original sense of the Greek *poiesis* and the kind of philosophical thought he finds in Emerson (Friedl 137). In a dialectical fashion Dewey discusses whether or not Emerson was a philosopher and/or a writer, depending on one's understanding of their strengths and weaknesses:

Perhaps those are nearer right, however, who deny that Emerson is a philosopher, because he is more than a philosopher. He would work, he says, by art, not by metaphysics, finding truth "in the sonnet, and the play." "I am," to quote him again, "in all my theories, ethics and politics, a poet"; and we may, I think, safely take his word for it that he meant to be a maker rather than a reflector (Dewey, "Emerson" 185).

Dewey goes on to stress that Emerson may have overemphasized "his creative substance at the expense of his reflective procedure" (Dewey, "Emerson" 187). The poet-philosopher who emerges as the philosopher of democracy is one who combines making and reflecting not only with regard to the realm of thought but with regard to common life itself: "I find it [Emerson's system] in the fact that he takes the distinctions and classifications which to most philosophers are true in and of and because of their systems, and makes them true of life, of the common experience of the everyday man" (Dewey, "Emerson" 188). The processes of making and reflecting, their divorce in moments of crisis and their creative interaction when we solve a problem become one of the key figures of thought in Dewey's pragmatism. They will be reviewed and revalued by applying them to situations such as a child touching a flame (in "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology"), a man having lost his way (in "The Control of Ideas by Facts") or people enjoying a game (in *Art as Experience*). But the concern with philosophical dualisms is embedded in the wider notion that modern society and sensibility suffers from fragmentation and dissociation of experience, a loss of some kind of wholeness that may have never existed but the lack of which was nevertheless felt to be a pressing problem, occupying both artists and philosophers.

Traditional philosophy with its "epistemological dualism" (Dewey, "Control of Ideas" 79) of Subject and Object, Mind and Matter, Body and Soul obviously is not only not helpful in this situation but part of the problem. The pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, George H. Mead sets out to overcome them by a radical contextualization of philosophical terms within processes of human action. For within our common experience, Dewey claims, we interact with our social and natural environment in a way in which doing, feeling, and thinking go hand in hand. Going home along a thoroughly familiar path, for instance, we may only occasionally check aspects of our environment against our idea of the way home, but "the rational factor – the mutual distinction and mutual reference of fact and

meaning – enters only incidentally" (Dewey, "Control of Ideas" 87). It is when our plans are thwarted and our habitual actions become problematic that categories such as self and reality, fact and idea become useful in describing our attempts to adjust. In a crisis, such as having lost our way, we note the lack of correspondence between ideas and things, our action is halted, we become conscious of ourselves in discord with our environment, we reflect and begin to interpret our surroundings with a view to our objectives. An idea in that situation opens a possibility, it is an option to act and therefore not an end, but a phase in a process that aims at a renewed correspondence of our ideas with reality. Ideas are tested in action derived from them, they are "true" when our working hypotheses succeed and lead to a readjustment with our environment.

Nowhere is the social significance for a tight connection between action and reflection more pronounced than in Dewey's theory of democracy as put forward in *The Public and its Problems* (1927), where Dewey applies his earlier ideas in epistemology to the field of political philosophy. Democracy is understood as reflective cooperation; it is rooted in "conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it" and where this sense of community is cherished (Dewey, *Public* 149). There is no democracy without a consciousness of communal life and there is no community without human cooperation reflected upon through communication so as to negotiate a fair distribution of labor and its results, and to account for the consequence of human activities. "Thus we come upon the primary problem of the public: to achieve such recognition of itself as will give it weight in the selection of official representatives and in the definition of their responsibilities and rights" (Dewey, *Public* 77). The divorce of doing and reflecting, the obstacle in the public's self-recognition and articulation is brought about by the complexity of interaction and the differentiation of knowledge about it. This makes it increasingly difficult to attribute consequences to activities and to identify problems as common or, indeed, to identify any commonality:

"We" and "our" exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort [...] Interactions, transactions, occur *de facto* and the results of interdependence follow. But participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns. They demand *communication* as a prerequisite. [...] Only when there exist signs or symbols of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed as from without, be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated (Dewey, *Public* 151–152).

The public is not tied to a particular mode of rational deliberation but is the reflexive plane necessary to coordinate and regulate human interaction on a large scale. The terms 'public' and 'private' are functional as they describe the shift from an activity felt only to affect those who are immediately

involved towards one which is considered to affect others who do not directly participate, yet wish to be protected from or asked about the consequences of these activities: "Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences" (Dewey, *Public* 126). With his ideas that the ideal model of democratic interaction may be achieved in groups working together, that modern society lacks a medium of self-representation to become aware of itself and check its activities, and that new and different modes of communication commensurable with modern life must be found, Dewey is not alone. They underlie Jane Addams' social philosophy, Charles H. Cooley's ideas of *Social Organization*, theories of socialization by George H. Mead, and the newspaper projects of Dewey, Robert Park and others. Their social thought often borders on aesthetic concerns as they expect help for more extensive communication from literature. Thus "Mead's model of the social act [is] conceived in terms of drama, his model of communal order [...] bears definite resemblance to the order of the novel, [...] Cooley's method of exploring the conscious and unconscious relations of the social body by 'sympathetic introspection' very much resembles the method of the novelist" (Ickstadt, "Concepts" 105). Addams insists that the newspapers and "literature, too, portrays [...] a desire to know all kinds of life," (Addams 8) and Dewey's hope in *The Public and its Problems* is placed on artists as "the real purveyor of news" (Dewey, *Public* 184). Not surprisingly, his chapter on the "Search for the Great Community" culminates in calling Walt Whitman the seer of democracy as "a life of free and enriching communion." Poems contribute to communication and participation, which are the basis of democratic cooperation. Whitman in particular poses as the democratic individual who may identify with everyone and who everyone is invited to identify with. Along with Whitman, Dewey leans towards a pathos Williams clearly rejects in his poetry: "And when the emotional force, the mystic force one might say, of communication, of the miracle of shared life and shared experience is spontaneously felt, the hardness and crudeness of contemporary life will be bathed in the light that never was on land or sea" (Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* 164).

As against this faith in a mystic moment, "Tract" is refreshingly skeptical. At times the speaker sounds not so much like an artist and critic worried over communal life, but rather like a salesman, advertising a new design that is aesthetically superior, socially more advisable, and incidentally also costs less than the old one – it might even yield a profit: "Share with us/share with us – it will be money/in your pockets" (CP 74). As money becomes an explicit issue, the social stratification of the town is suddenly apparent, as is the poet's cynical role-play. He also speaks as a representative of the poorer

part of town whose perspective onto the spectacle he tries to impart. Should he persuade the well-to-do citizens to share their grief, this may ultimately benefit them more than those "who have perhaps/nothing to lose" (CP 74). The concreteness of the poem about a funeral ritual calls forth serious doubts that changes in the realm of symbolic practices – and poetry is certainly one of them – will affect the economic stratification of a community. If division is part of the problem, can carrying art into life and teaching an aesthetic attitude to common townspeople make any significant difference? To de-emphasize hierarchy and wealth in a performance of equality could also be seen as mere compensation and ideological delusion. Since the poem also implies the suspicion that the conventional performance not only strengthened social divisions, but also arose from them, the idea of a new communion would indeed require a leap of faith. By the time he writes *Art as Experience* (1934) Dewey addresses the connection between economic structure and aesthetic experience brought up in the poem. *The Public and Its Problems* also elucidates the theoretical assumptions underlying the faith in the power of art, which is part of the poem.

As Beck and others note, Dewey says very little about the role of institutions in his political philosophy. What entrenches particularistic interests, cements unjust relations of power, and inhibits the free exchange of ideas is "habit." The tendency of human beings to think and act in channels accepted by their peers is itself the foundation for customs and institutions. The most succinct formulation of the power of habit, according to Dewey, is by William James from his *Principles of Psychology*, which he quotes at length:

"Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative influence. It alone is what keeps us within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the country-man to his log cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing" (Dewey, *Public* 159–160).

Habits that have originally been formed to ease and economize human interaction may not only become useless but major obstacles to a society recognizing itself as a community. When people cling to older notions developed in different contexts and therefore no longer adequate (individualism and property are Dewey's examples), they cannot develop the prop-

er means to solve current problems. This psycho-sociological conceptualization of power is directed against the myth of man as acting upon rational consideration; that people instead usually act from "crudely intelligized emotion and from habit" (Dewey, *Public* 158) and that an analytical or scientific attitude is itself a habit to be learned, explains why a change in political machinery will never change much: "The creation of a *tabula rasa* in order to permit the creation of a new order is so impossible as to set at naught both the hope of buoyant revolutionaries and the timidity of scared conservatives" (Dewey, *Public* 162). Any significant political change will require a change in habits and therefore be a cultural change; this explains the key role of the scientist, the philosopher, and the artist. They are not free from habit but they habitually question habits. Wrongly understood, however, "science," "philosophy," and "art" as institutionalized powers may also embalm and ossify inadequate habits of thought and opinion, just as language fixes these concepts in words. Thus Dewey's effort to free the concepts of traditional philosophy from centuries of controversy in order to bring them to life again, that is, to make them useful in the formulation of contemporary problems. And thus the enormous importance Williams attributes to the cleansing of words and their use, as though they hold some magic power. They do, because through his use he creates a new social habit, a new ritual, or a new symbol. "Tract" also answers the obvious question as to what may make a new habit better than the old one: it is better because it is closer to the natural process of life and death, and reminds people of this process, thereby emphasizing their commonness as creatures.

That art captures something of the quality of common experience and that this has democratic implications is central to Dewey's aesthetic theory; it is also an assumption made by Richard Poirier as a critic who draws a connection between a pragmatist impulse for "a public poetry and a public philosophy" and a particular use of language. To him, the democratic impetus of texts by Emerson, William James, Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens involves "a recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness" (Poirier 3-4). Consequently, the major literary strategy he examines is the repeated use of tropes encircling and forever approaching but never fixing the object of thought. Through troping his chosen writers create "a flexibility where meanings are emplaced only to be edged out by alternative ones, and where the human presence already implicit in the sound of words can through the very gestures that dissolve that presence, be refigured and affirmed" (Poirier 10-11). Though Williams "obviously" belongs in the tradition of pragmatist poets, it is difficult to reconcile him to

the notion of vagueness and more generally to the linguistic skepticism that Poirier focuses upon⁷ (Poirier 31). Using the example of a less discursive poem than "Tract," I want to show, first, how characteristic features of Williams poetic language, such as the isolation of words by line breaks, a tight formal design and the "tough colloquial flatness" of "matter of fact" verse (Breslin 52) are used to represent the flow of experience; secondly, I want to point to the difficulties that arise from the assumption that a challenge to habits of perception has an emancipating, or even democratic effect.

"Sick African" (1917) presents a black family in a moment suggestive of sexuality and religion, with an emphasis on procreation, sexual potency and the physicality of two black bodies. Described in this way, the poem seems to be caught up in "a curious mélange of stereotypes" (Ahearn 69); seen as performative act however, it is actually directed against arresting and distorting perceptions of life. The interplay of representation and form both affirms and undermines different habits.

Wm. Yates, colored,
Lies in bed reading
The Bible –
And recovering from
A dose of epididymitis
Contracted while Grace
Was pregnant with
The twelve day old
Baby:
There sits Grace, laughing,
Too weak to stand. (CP 59)

The one compact stanza suggests at first a portrait or tableau: a man in bed reading and a woman who sits "there." Bursting out of the frame of a frozen moment is "laughing" as an audible rather than visual element and a momentary one, certainly shorter than "lies," "sits," "reading," and "recovering." More importantly, as a variation of the earlier line "Lies in bed reading," "There sits Grace, laughing" is a response to the man's predicament as a result of the events leading to the moment: "Lies in bed" may well be a pun for his marital infidelity, for he contracted an often sexually transmitted disease "while Grace/was pregnant with/the twelve day old/Baby." This clause contracts her pregnancy, his sexual activity, the birth, and twelve days of lying in, now ironically done by him, in a semantically odd construction;

⁷ Winfried Fluck suggests that Poirier's focus on Emerson and linguistic skepticism is ultimately motivated by "the attempt to set an independent American tradition against a 'European' Poststructuralism" (Fluck, "John Dewey's Ästhetik," 165, my translation).

though all pregnancy is a state implying growth, this one, as in time-lapse photography, contains a breathtaking succession of events.

The relation between seeming stasis and dynamic motion contained therein can also be discerned in the very structure of the poem. Its single stanza audibly and visually displays a symmetry whereby the first five lines with "Wm. Yates" as grammatical subject are inversely mirrored in the last five on Grace. The line "Contracted while Grace" provides the transition in the middle of the poem, grammatically connecting man and woman through his crucial act that now affects the relation between them. Though there is no rhyme, the sounds at the end of the lines contribute to the symmetrical, mirrored structure: colored/stand; reading/laughing, Bible/Baby, from/old and the fricatives of "epididymitis," "Grace" and "with." Alliteration, position, and length of line make the baby echo the Bible, but while "Baby" is a solid presence and probably the cause of Grace's weakness, the meaning of the "The Bible" is much less clear; it may be an indicator of genuine piety or of conventional morality or a hiding place for a bad conscience or a bit of everything. The symmetry suggests William's and Grace's common weakness, both with sore sexual organs, while the deviations from symmetry underline the differences not only of their predicaments but also their histories and attitudes. The poem captures the intersection of powerful forces that both create and threaten the relations between men and women: sexuality, the order of marriage, the categorizing languages of science, of religion, and sentimentality, forgiveness or even "Grace," the joke that life may play on people and the sense of justice one may read in it. In this vein, the ending of the poem closes it without providing closure: sitting and laughing, Grace' posture contrasts with both, immobile lying and strong standing; her weakness points either to laughter or, more likely, to the recent birth and thus to life as ongoing and inimical to a standstill. It also points to the weakness of the flesh, literally and metaphorically, and thus to human weakness as a notion that may lead to forgiveness.

As in "Sick African," Williams' insistence on life as an open and often chaotic process, necessarily ordered through artistic work, is often achieved by endings where an intense sensuous experience draws attention to the interplay of dynamic forces in the poem. Relishing the plums, captured in the repeated long vowels of "so sweet and so cold" in "This is just to say" (CP 372), for instance, goes beyond any conventional apology, because instead of remorse it evokes a continuing temptation and the readiness to give in to it. Here, as in "Sick African," the sensuous moment of the poem plays against the notion of forgiveness, questioning, elaborating, and deepening it (see Altieri). In a different, almost Steinian fashion, namely through repetition with variation, the abandonment to a sensuous experience is captured in "To a Poor old Woman":

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her (CP 383)

A sensory perception, as Dewey would point out again and again, is never just passive but involves the motor apparatus of our body. Tasting and "munching a plum" means to shift it around in one's mouth to get the full flavor of it. The stanza is an example of what Halter calls "iconic rendering of (e)motion," capturing the motion and activity necessary to appreciate the full "flavor" of a simple phrase (Halter 241). What is still an explicit lecture in "Tract," namely that the activities of life should be given an adequate shape and be consciously *performed* is in these poems implied in form itself. Therefore the poems can do without the didactic attitude of a speaker – indeed, "Sick African" even pokes fun at the authorities of the sentimental poet and the coldly observant doctor. What these note is only part of the picture, and the stereotypes they invite are distorting habits of perception, to be overcome in the process of reading.

First, the title evokes the sentimental image of the black man as piously suffering, a notion seemingly supported by his reading the Bible. The implied sentimental poet is one who manipulates his material to arouse condescending empathy. But the first line's classificatory attributes and the medical term do away with sentimentality; instead they evoke the sexually potent male and the coldly defining view of the doctor, nurse, or social worker. The voice that then turns to Grace is neither the sentimental poet's nor that of a doctor with their equally limited view of reality; yet to Barry Ahearn it suggests "still another stereotyped view of black behavior – though beset by numerous troubles, they always find some humor in their plight." In his reading, the poem "represents a paring down of social stereotyping to the least degree; it shows, therefore, Williams's dissatisfaction with his cultural perspective, but it also shows no alternative point of view" (Ahearn 68–69).

Perhaps the only way that an alternative perspective can become apparent is to perceive the stereotypes as part of a design, rather like Stein's use of them in *Three Lives*, and to regard the poem as another performance.⁸ "Grace" who dominates the second half of the poem is both a name and a central religious concept. As the former, it is related to Yates, as the latter it is related to "The Bible." Personified Grace, whose laughter may foretell

⁸ That Stein's exploitation of the formal and cognitive patterns of stereotyping is rather daring in the historical context of the beginning of the 20th century, I explain in Astrid Franke, *Keys to Controversies. Stereotypes in Modern American Novels* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1999) 81–121.

forgiveness, shifts the focus away from Yates and thereby also revises the two or perhaps three stereotypes. For although there is a suggestion of illicit sexuality, it is tied to a notion of sin, suffering, and forgiveness. These religious terms, in turn, pertain to the relation between the couple rather than to God. As in "Tract," the emphasis is on horizontal relations between people and ongoing life, which includes sexuality and also weakness. By the end of the poem we also have to modify the notion of a "speaker." For the poet here is one who continually revises his persona until we have to conclude that there is no one speaker "inside" the poem. Instead, the poet is present in the design of the poem and within its structure. Consequently, there is no model of identification, no ethos and moral authority represented by the poet, but rather the necessity to attend to what is formed by the different attitudes and styles implied in very few words. The line breaks help to slow down reading and to modify early conclusions, therefore the cognitive effort is not one of decoding an encrypted truth but rather approaching a reality that will be known by overcoming essentializing conceptions of it and by perceiving the whole as form. Form balances potentially disorderly, destructive forces against morality, but also a stifling conventional morality with the lightness of laughter, which may hold the beginnings of forgiveness. What looks at first like a tableau is actually a moment of dynamic structure and of ordered movement. Social and literary conventions are part of the poem's design, and it is attention to structure and words in their relations, which provides an alternative to cultural habits. Form has absorbed the didactic lecturer of "Tract" and with him the framework of a rehearsal. What we get now is the poem as the form-giving act itself.

The poem as a balancing act, so aptly caught in its imperfect symmetry, raises several issues. First, even though it captures Poirier's "flow of experience," it also insists on a tight control of it. Paradoxically, it offers an experience of immediacy to those who achieve a distanced attitude to it. Since there is no easily identifiable moral authority in the poem and since what we may gain by this new performance is not discursively presented as in "Tract," the tension between a possible immediacy and a critical, even analytical stance is much stronger and the poem more 'difficult.' It must have been particularly difficult to readers who encountered the poem in "The Masses," to whom free verse may have suggested formlessness, as it did to its editor Max Eastman, and who could expect explicitly political poems in conventional form from the magazine (see Frail 104-05). Working with this tension presumably provides a more intense or refined experience; it requires attention to detail and the conscious work of revision in both the artist and the reader. In an essay on Whitman, Williams criticized that he

was a romantic in a bad sense. [...] He composed 'freely,' he followed his untrammelled necessity. What he did not do was to study what he had done, to go over it, to select and reject, which is the making of the artist.

Whitman took in the good and the bad in structure merely because he 'felt' it and himself made it. He composed beautifully but he revised – or failed to revise – like a politician, not an artist. He did as much as he could maybe. But we have to do better, we have to look, to discover particulars and to refine (Williams, *Selected Essays* 230).

The need for a critical attitude towards what is made, leads to Williams' "inability (or was it unwillingness?) to distinguish between the genres of criticism and of poetry" (Ickstadt, "Williams as Critic" 81). As if to make a point about the difference between poets and politicians and the formers' superior self-awareness, "Sick African" "refuses to make commentary or allegory about the 'woman question,' race, or economic class" (Frail 105). Instead, its politics are tied to a modernist aesthetic, challenging social and literary conventions. At the same time, it clearly implies the danger, that the affirmation of life and experience as process becomes itself a stereotypical notion, especially when it is associated with the female, an ethnic group, or even "America." If the "moral function of art is to remove prejudice, do away with the scale that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive," (Dewey, *Art* 325) a particular poem may test even this idea as a possible preconception.⁹

To upset the routine of thought and perception is therefore an important but not the only function of art, according to Dewey and Williams. The political power also lies in the interplay of discord and harmony it elicits. In the process of artistic creation, making alternates with reflecting as a prerequisite of revision and continued making. This imitates the rhythm of life itself as Dewey describes it:

There is in nature, even below the level of life, something more than mere flux and change. Form is arrived at whenever a stable, even though moving, equilibrium is reached. [...] The rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union not only persists in man but becomes conscious with him. Its conditions are material out of which he forms purposes. Emotion is the conscious sign of a break, actual or impending. The discord is the occasion that induces reflection. Desire for restoration of the union converts mere emotion into interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony. [...] Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension" (Dewey, *Art* 14-15).

⁹ Cf. Ickstadt's critique of Mukařovský and Dewey who do not "analyze to any great extent aesthetic experience as an individual process of reception: what happens in the act of reading or of seeing. Both focus almost exclusively on placing the aesthetic within the larger context of experience and on the interaction between the aesthetic and the other functions" (Ickstadt, "Pluralist Aesthetics" 269).

Like the artist, Dewey himself cares in a peculiar way for the phase in art where union is achieved.¹⁰ This, I think, has to do with the significance of the cosmic rhythm for his philosophical method. His philosophical approach to questions of epistemology, politics, or art is to interpret an initial dualism, a current separation or "problem" as a loss of integration into contexts. This loss can be overcome through a contextual description in which the important concepts are not yet separate entities and still part of a process. Nowhere does he go further, "below the level of life," than when he sets out to explain aesthetic experience. This not only supports the argument that art is continuous with life but also offers aesthetic experience as a place where a cosmic rhythm as structured by tension and resolution, by discord and reintegration, can be experienced – in art one may thus experience his pragmatist method. For his method the possibility of wholeness, however momentary or tentative, is supremely important; with regard to his political philosophy, for instance, it supports the ideals of community and democracy "in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected" (Dewey, *Public* 148). Because the satisfaction this may yield can be experienced in art, "aesthetic experience becomes the most important social experience, so that the successful integration of single elements of perception and experience can become a metaphor for the successful integration of an individual into a community" (Fluck, "Dewey's Aesthetics" 179–80, my translation). More radically, John Beck concludes that "for both Dewey and Williams democracy begins with the aesthetic" (Beck 160).

It is worthwhile to examine this last statement a bit further with regard to *Art as Experience* and a poem by Williams. If art is rooted in experience that may transcend the divisions of class, race, national or historical cultures, the social contribution of art is surely tied to the availability of aesthetic experience. Consequently, the question of access to art is central to *Art as Experience*, where Dewey's politics shift towards a more pronounced democratic socialism and a critique of capitalism. Art may not change the distribution of money, but if economic conditions prevent people from a full enjoyment of art and from the satisfaction arising from an exercise of their creative powers, then these conditions have to be changed. Dewey's position is most prominent in the last chapter of *Art as Experience*, where he returns to the divorce of life and art in contemporary society. One of the reasons for this

¹⁰ For a careful discussion of Dewey's use of "unity" in his aesthetic theory, see Fluck, "John Dewey's Ästhetik und die Literaturtheorie der Gegenwart." See also Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 32.

divorce lies in the disappearance of aesthetic experience from the processes of work and production. Though the ideal is one of craftsmanship in small town communities, Dewey stresses that the cause of the modern dilemma is extraneous to machinery and mechanical production. Rather, it lies in "the economic system of production for private gain" and may only be solved "in a radical social alteration, which effects the degree and kind of participation the worker has in the production and social disposition of the wares he produces. [...] The idea that the basic problem can be solved merely by increase of hours of leisure is absurd. Such an idea merely retains the old dualistic division between labor and leisure" (Dewey, *Art* 343). Only when people can participate in shaping the process of production, when their contribution is acknowledged and the gains fairly distributed will aesthetic experience be widely accessible rather than a private luxury. In that sense, democracy begins with "reflective cooperation" (Honneth) where art's beneficial role is to increase the consciousness of community resulting from common work.

In "Fine Work with Pitch and Copper" (1936) a momentary integration of various elements of perception, and an equally momentary integration of individuals into a larger unit coincide in the description of a construction site. It is a beautiful example of Dewey's claim that "form is arrived at whenever a stable, even though moving, equilibrium is reached." The poem brings up the question of the relation between this momentary equilibrium, the role of work and a democratic order, since the moment arises from having worked and being about to work¹¹:

Now they are resting
in the fleckless light
separately in unison (CP 405)

The poet whose insistence on "Now" foreshadows a crucial moment prepared by the use of tense and aspect throughout the poem, who has carefully allocated his three sentences into three, then two, and finally one stanza, each consisting of three lines, is a craftsman of language, working with grammar, sound, and the visual impression of print arranged on a page. He creates not Fine Art but Fine Work, referring to both the activity and the result: the exchange of acting and reflecting, of giving shape, being shaped, and examining shape, but also the well-made object, a clear and regular form, lying open for inspection. Obviously, the poem aspires to be such a

¹¹ A related interpretation of the poem is offered by Ian Copestake who reads the harmony of the different elements of the poem as an analogy to the poet's desire for a harmonious relation with his material. See Ian Copestake, "The Morality of Language in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams," Unpublished dissertation, The University of Leeds, 1999, 212–15.

work and the poet, by implication, a craftsman and critic. The difficult position of him who will critically assess common work is apparent in the last stanza, for the act of reflecting singles "one" out. His acts are grammatically distinct from those of his fellow workmen: "chewing" still connects him to their ongoing "resting," but "picks" and "runs" as the only verbs in simple present tense denoting action set him off in that special moment which is also the culminating point of the poem:

One still chewing
picks up a copper strip
and runs his eye along it (CP 406)

Like so many of his poems, "Fine Work" has "a quality of internal happening, of an inward structural event that somehow manages to convey a sense of the mystery of objects and relationships" (Myers 462); it is because of this preoccupation with relationships between men and between men and objects that we return to the question of the poet-critic's position. To what extent "one" can be separate and still in unison echoes the question of how to unite the many in one, only that in contrast to *e pluribus unum*, "separately in unison" is an adverbial clause modifying not what people are but what they do: resting. This may at first be read to refer to their positions in space "like the sacks/of sifted stone" but the comparison also implies that inherent in the stillness of regular order and rest is the readiness for future action, continuing the work that has been done before lunch. Latent movement in stillness is captured in the rhythmic irregularity with which a visual order is described. After the first stanza has established a rhythm of two beats per line, announcing the visual order of "regularly by twos," the second stanza upsets regularity by its line break after "sacks:"

Like the sacks
of sifted stone stacked
regularly by twos (CP 405)

There is a rhythmic movement, even a syncopated beat in the lines describing the visual order of material, as there is in "The copper in eight/foot strips has been" and "Down the center at right/angles and lies ready" before the last lines of the respective stanzas resume the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables with two beats per line. Rhythm is important because "in rhythmic ordering, every close and pause, like the rest in music, connects as well as delimits and individualizes" (Dewey *Art* 172). Rhythm can overcome the dualism of rest and work because its pauses are not just signs of exhaustion but imply "an onward motion" and a preparation – within the stasis of geometrical forms, as in the achievements of the past or the stillness of the present moment, "lies ready" continuing action. It is announced by the act of critical inspection: still chewing, but no longer resting, though not

yet opening the sacks. Looking at what has been made in preparation for what is to be done brings together past, present, and future in a moment of active perception: "and runs his eye along it." "One" may still be in unison physically, but he is separate through his critical act. His critical vision, however, is a necessary moment in the continuing work together. And work is also what is required of the reader, not philological work as prompted, for instance, by "The Waste Land," but the heightened attention to the physical body of words as written and spoken, that is, their arrangement and the resulting sound pattern. The mystical moment of maintaining individual integrity and yet being in unison with others is not a prophetic one but present in the "Now" wrested from daily life and work.

"Fine Work with Pitch and Copper" mingles even in the title the work of the poet (with pitch) and that of the men (with copper), it draws on work, it presents itself as work – but it is still deliberately separate from the scene and the work it describes. It constitutes "a space of immanence where life is revealed in the act of giving shape to it" (Ickstadt, "Williams as Critic" 94) but there is nothing to suggest that the ordinary and yet almost mystic moment is shared by the men themselves. The skill of construction and the critical eye of the poet as separate from the scene can perceive a moment of rest in work as a musical pause. Since order, rhythm, and harmony are obviously a result of artistic skill, we may suspect that this integration of elements may be achieved only in a poem. Likewise, the solution of the paradox "separately in unison" with its political and social implications may exist nowhere except in art, but by projecting that possibility, the poem also opens up the reality of common work to imaginatively include this democratic ideal. Thus the poem reflects back on Dewey's writing: it raises the question whether Dewey's reference to life and experience as preceding divisions and fragmentation is not likewise a poetic projection.

In an essay on Dewey's concept of experience, Richard Shusterman argues that Dewey uses it primarily "as end and means" to improve experience, not as epistemological foundation (Shusterman, "Dewey über Erfahrung: Fundamentalphilosophie oder Rekonstruktion?" 96). In this, Dewey is close to the work of the poet who can suggest something only as a possibility, latent, perhaps, in reality, but nevertheless provisional; in fact, Dewey's descriptions of moments where successful social integration is achieved, as in the above passage from *Reconstruction*, is itself an artistic attempt of "a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity" which is the function of art (Dewey, *Art* 81). What is presented as description of natural processes and human activities is often a "passionate attempt" to establish a philosophical basis from which it is possible to argue and act against the dissolution of the public or the growing division of life and art (Ickstadt, "Pluralist Aesthetics" 272). The pre-

sumed basis is actually a means and an end, a more integrated and more democratic social life. This goal he certainly shares with Williams:

Without conceptions of art the world might well be and has usually been a shambles of groups lawful enough but bent upon nothing else than mutual destruction. This comes of their partiality. They lack that which must draw them together – without destruction of their particular characteristics; the thing that will draw them together because in their disparateness it discovers an identity. Nowhere will this be found save in the sensual, the real, world of the arts. Every masterwork liberates while it draws the world closer in mutual understanding and tolerance. This is its aroma of the whole. (Williams, *Selected Essays* 199)

To make this an assumption of one's work as a philosopher, poet, and critic certainly requires an act of faith, a Jamesian will to believe that both men have repeatedly emphasized. Their strained relation, to which a 1945 letter to Norman MacLeod testifies again ["Christ! Are there no intelligent men left in the world? Dewey might do something for me, but I am not worth his notice." (Williams, *Selected Letters* 239)] now seems to be and perhaps always has been a matter of recognition rather than difference in thought. This is why Williams' poems may be confidently read as rehearsing Dewey's ideas and revealing a poetic moment in his philosophy.

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Pragmaticism – A New Approach to Literary and Cultural Analysis

After an entire century in which the idea of mimesis was increasingly discredited and finally discarded, the suspicion has now returned that fictional realities have something to do with their historical context, after all. Yet how do we explain this particular relationship? And if we define it as mimetic, how can we speak of mimesis in the new millennium without merely falling back onto positions long overcome by deconstructionism and subsequent theories? We can do so, I claim, under the premises of a new pragmatist, i. e. subject-oriented semiotic approach to literature and other forms of representation. This essay aims to outline this new approach.

If one considers the strategies where theory has traditionally tried to explain the connection between fictional and non-fictional realities, one cannot avoid noticing that an *ex negativo* approach prevails. That is, over the course of the twentieth century, the interrelation was declared non-mimetic, yet the question of an alternative explanation was generally left open. This is not surprising, but rather a necessary consequence of a specific theoretical grounding: for semiotic thinking that rests on dyadic sign concepts cannot conceive of any such relationship, and it cannot do so by definition. To quote Saussure's famous definition of signifier and signified: "Le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et une image acoustique" (98). As this semiotic theory has monopolized theoretical thinking in literary and cultural studies for an entire century, operating with premises whose implications are now entirely predictable, it is worth looking for alternatives. The semiotic premises that have guided theoretical thinking for such a long time – their initial vital importance notwithstanding – have been exhausted. Evidence of this can be found in the growing disproportion, witnessed in the late 1980s and 1990s, between proliferating theoretical reflection and predictable results, – all a consequence of the theoretical basis. The theoretical implications of a dyadic sign model cannot but force all arguments into figures of binary opposition. The analytical results not only of the classical structuralist, but also post-structuralist, deconstructivist, New Historicist, race, class and gender theories are all clear indications of this.

The quandaries of deconstruction have been well noted. Suffice it to say that the systematic implications of its semiotic premises have lead to a number of epistemological dead ends. One of these is the deconstructivist axiom