SURPRISE ENCOUNTERS:
READINGS IN TRANSATLANTIC MODERNISM

Kate Stanley

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ABSTRACT

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Kate Stanley

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, some of the most forceful accounts of modernity have located the traumatic shocks of war, urbanization, and technological change at the heart of modern experience and modernist literature. *Surprise Encounters* argues that a dominant framework of shock and rupture has obscured a nineteenth-century conception of surprise, which transformed models of mind and narrative on both sides of the Atlantic. I draw on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s formulation of life as “a series of surprises” to distinguish a paradigm of surprise from Walter Benjamin’s influential definition of modernity as a “series of shocks and collisions.” For Emerson, the fact that we live in an uncertain universe of chance requires moment-by-moment exposure to contingency. The challenge, as he framed it, was to invent new forms of living and writing that allow the unexpected to amplify rather than deaden receptivity, to enrich rather than impoverish experience.

“Surprise,” one of Emerson’s “lords of life,” guided such American writers as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen, but also Benjamin’s shock poets *par excellence*—Baudelaire and Proust. Each translates Emerson’s central question—How do I live so that every moment is new?—into compositional terms, to ask: How do I write so that every sentence is new? Their widely various responses to the Emersonian call hinge on unexpected syntactical and scenic turns that reorient attention and restructure narrative form. My chapters locate surprise in Proust’s and Baudelaire’s techniques for collapsing
timelessness with the ephemeral (modernist methods I trace back to Emerson’s “method of nature”); in the lacunae that lodge between past and future tenses in James’s scenes of recognition; in Stein’s cultivation of fresh grammars of attention; and in Larsen’s challenge to Anglo-American master plots that deadeningly dovetail with the deterministic logic of race and reproduction. Each writer’s dedication to renewal—temporal, psychic, grammatical, narrative—reframes the present as an open site of experiential and experimental possibility.

Beyond representing surprise, the writers of this study are dedicated to training new habits of attention to the unpredictable events that punctuate daily life. In this endeavor, they join psychologists William James and Silvan Tomkins in theorizing surprise as a sudden event that both arrests and spurs processes of feeling and thinking. The literary subject of each chapter is a theorist of emotion and modern experience who exercises a capacity to express as well as enact the aesthetic and psychic dimensions of surprise.
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### Abbreviations

Quotations from the following works are identified by abbreviated title and page number. Complete citations can be found in the Works Cited.

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Introduction

By Way of Proust’s Bedrooms

“Experience…has a way of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulation.”
—William James

In the first scene of A la recherche du temps perdu, Marcel’s drama of going to bed revolves around two poles of experience: the shock of the unfamiliar and the analgesic of habit. The Combray bedroom of his childhood patterns the struggle of falling asleep and waking that will endure for the remainder of the novel. As the narrator recalls, a “magic lantern” intended to bring him pleasure succeeds only in destroying the room’s comforting familiarity (Swann’s 13). Bathed in the lantern’s “multicoloured apparitions,” a doorknob whose handling was so unconscious “it seemed to open of its own accord” suddenly becomes a threatening intruder (14, 13). The recast room wrenches the narrator from the intimacy that “the anaesthetizing influence of habit” had wrought between his consciousness and its surroundings. When his mind and its lodgings are aligned, Marcel is free to pay “no more attention to the room than to the self” (14). Having neutralized disturbances between physical and psychic space, the narrator can reflect on other things. But the defensive labor performed by the “housekeeper” habit is never complete (12). In each new or defamiliarized bedroom a painstaking process repeats itself: the shock of the unknown must be subsumed into self-sameness through the ongoing work of habituation.

The alternation between newness and numbness that defines Combray extends into a broader paradigm of modernity in Walter Benjamin’s account of modern
experience. The childhood bedroom may seem far removed from the onslaught of war, urbanization, and technological change, but in Benjamin’s framework, sensory assaults of every order—whether issuing forth from the magic lantern, from “the amorphous crowd of passers-by,” or from shell-fire at the front—all contributed to a “crisis of experience” at the turn of the twentieth century (Guermantes 13, Illuminations 165).¹ In his 1939 essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin generalizes Sigmund Freud’s concept of shock—trauma undergone in wartime—into the defining structure of modernity (Illuminations 161).² Modern consciousness, in Freud’s conception, must act as a “protective shield” against relentless blows generated by the “excessive energies at work in the external world” (Freud qtd. in Illuminations 161). As Benjamin deduces, however, guarding oneself against unanticipated experiences comes at the high cost of a generally dulled receptivity to all new encounters. In this context, “protection against stimuli” works according to the same mechanisms as the conception of defensive habit that Proust introduces in Combray (Freud qtd. in Illuminations 161). Modernity’s assault on receptive consciousness leaves open only two experiential possibilities in the modern era: those of shock and shock-defense. When experience becomes coterminous with crisis the traumatic course of history is figured as a closed circuit that does not allow for contingency or change.³

¹ As Martin Jay has argued, “no one became so acute and persistent a diagnostician of the crisis than Walter Benjamin” (Songs 329).
² Benjamin also draws on the work of Henri Bergson and Georg Simmel to diagnose the withering of experience in a shock-saturated modern age, but he privileges the historicity of Freud’s framework of shellshock. However, he dehistoricizes Freud’s theory when he generalizes it beyond the conditions of war that are its context.
³ Following the atrocities of World War II, Benjamin’s declaration of “the destruction of experience” seems to prophesize the course of the twentieth century. See Giorgio Agamben’s extension of Benjamin’s polemic in Infancy and History: The Destruction of
Benjamin’s story of modern “breakdown” privileges the modernist writer as the primary navigator of modern life defined as a “series of shocks and collisions” (*Illuminations* 182). He anoints Baudelaire the first “modern poet,” observing how deftly he parries sensory inundation into poetic forms that preserve the city’s visceral immediacy. According to Benjamin, the modernist hallmarks of Baudelaire and Proust record psychic and temporal rupture. They also register the writers’ respective distances from the moment of breakage between the modern era and an auratic pre-modern period. In this account, the past being broken with seems at once to float outside of history and to be situated in the nineteenth century, where Baudelaire could bear witness to its depletion. Baudelaire’s *correspondances* stand closest to a “fullness” of “authentic experience,” which has been “irretrievably lost” (*Illuminations* 181). Half a century later, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* can only access such authenticity through accidental encounters. It has thus become “a matter of chance whether an individual...can take hold of experience” (*Illuminations* 158). The modern writer’s dependence on chance confirms for Benjamin the “increasing atrophy of experience” (*Illuminations* 159).

*Surprise Encounters* will argue that Proust and Baudelaire were central to a robust strain of transatlantic modernism that embraced contingency and chance as a primary source of experiential potential as opposed to “poverty [*Armut*]” (*Illuminations* 182). As I

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*Experience.* From this vantage, some strains of contemporary trauma theory have claimed that all history is structured by trauma. For example, Cathy Caruth has influentially defined trauma by “an inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (“Introduction” 8). It falls to the critic to locate and narrate the traumatic latency of historical experience.

4 Benjamin understands Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* to be first and foremost a critique of Bergson’s idea that “the contemplative actualization of the stream of life [*la durée*] is a matter of free will” (*Illuminations* 157-58).
will show, the dominant definition of modern experience as a “series of shocks and collisions” has obscured an equally powerful conception of experience, which Ralph Waldo Emerson was first to define as “a series of surprises” (*Illuminations* 175, *EL* 413 and 483). “Surprise,” one of Emerson’s “lords of life,” guided such American writers as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen, but also, as I have discovered, Benjamin’s shock poets *par excellence*: Baudelaire and Proust (*EL* 490-91). For writers on both sides of the Atlantic, a fundamental belief in an open-ended world of chance is matched by equally open models of time and perception. Caught within shock’s closed, recursive loop, one is continually returned to a moment of rupture in the past that wasn’t fully experienced as it took place. By contrast, the open temporality of surprise retrieves a vital prospective dimension. As we will see, when sudden encounters are framed in the terms of surprise, the “loom of time” weaves threads of the past and future into unpredictable patterns that simultaneously suspend and mobilize the experience of the moment into what Gertrude Stein will call “the continuous present” (*EL* 490, *WL* 27). Shuttling between retrospection and prospection the perceptual field expands. While shock deadens perceptual consciousness, a surprise encounter serves to amplify receptivity—to enrich rather than impoverish experience.

The aim of this study is not to displace the dominance of shock with surprise in discussions of modernity. In fact, it is precisely this kind of either/or zero-sum thinking that the logic of surprise avoids. The conceptual distinction I want to make is a matter of shifted emphasis rather than of critical opposition. My most immediate claim is that when a structure of surprise is differentiated from the rubric of rupture, shock becomes only one possibility among many for understanding modern encounters. As Philip Fisher has
argued, some of the primary affects of aesthetic study—“including wonder, the sublime, as well as ‘that favorite modern aesthetic category, shock’”—are best understood within the broader category of an “aesthetics of surprise and suddenness” (Wonder 1). It is on these grounds that he later contends, “surprise, the eliciting of notice, becomes the very heart of what it means to ‘have an experience’ at all” (Wonder 200). As we will see, Fisher’s aesthetic conception of surprise aligns with its psychological definition as a category of experience that encompasses an array of responses to sudden encounters. Surprise can be so variously experienced and spur such diverse aesthetic responses because it is a neutral structure of attention. When the perceptual apparatus is suddenly reoriented, any predetermined affective or linguistic content is temporarily cleared from consciousness. This study examines the work of writers who seek narrative means of holding open the interval of surprise in order to explore the temporal and perceptual dimensions of an encounter that precedes interpretation.

Each of my chapters examines a writer who translates Emerson’s central question—How do I live so that every moment is new?—into compositional terms, to ask: How do I write so that every sentence is new? This dedication to sentence-by-sentence renewal renovates literary representations of time and perceptual consciousness. As we will see, surprise encounters are often framed within the narrative unit of the scene. Those writers who develop scenic representations of surprise frequently confront a formal question: how does one render the immediate experience of being seized by surprise—an apprehension that precedes full comprehension—without domesticating the unexpected into narrative or syntactical convention? Even the simple statement, “I am surprised,” is a necessarily retrospective evaluation of a moment or an event that has
already passed. Formal features like James’s syntactical shuttling between past and future tenses, Stein’s efforts to develop a grammar of feeling, and Larsen’s reconfigurations of plot around the logic of weather exemplify a broader commitment to surprise that helped to transform modernist models of mind and narrative at the beginning of the twentieth century. In each case, an affective force that reorients attention assumes an aesthetic force that restructures lexical and literary forms.

The writers I focus on pair the representational challenge posed by surprise with a pedagogical challenge. Beyond rendering surprise at the level of the sentence, the scene, or the plot-turn, they take on the paradoxical task of training themselves and their readers in a practice I call reading for surprise. For Proust, as for all of the writers of this study, reading for surprise means cultivating newly attuned habits of attention that are open rather than defensively closed to the unexpected. A habitual openness to surprise facilitates receptive exchanges with stimuli that braid the familiar and the strange. As the _Recherche_ epitomizes, one’s response to unexpected encounters depends as much on perceptual orientation as it does on the object of encounter. Just as sudden events may assume different valences, Proust’s narrator learns that habits of reception are contingent and changeable. His learning curve is protracted over the course of four thousand pages—an entire lifetime—but the novel is punctuated by episodes that glimpse the possibility of realms of experience beyond bipolar thinking. However, those crucial scenes are easily overshadowed by more dramatically embattled dynamics that cast habit in one of two opposed roles: helpmate or saboteur. As the Combray bedroom exhibits, protective habits act as a last line of defense (albeit an exceptionally vulnerable one)
against foreign infringements on the familiar. But helpmate habit’s anodyne aid is no match for the aggressive assault of shock.

The saboteur version of habit is vividly illustrated by the memorable thesis of Samuel Beckett’s essay on Proust: “habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit” (19). The iron-strength manacle he describes stands in stark contrast with the weak-willed “housekeeper” of childhood. “Paralys[ing] our attention,” this kind of habit is the adversary of aesthetic innovation and social transformation; for Beckett it is the force that stultifies Marcel’s creative potential (20). Beckett’s assessment of the novel chimes with a European modernist avant-garde that embraced shock’s revolutionary potential to shatter the enslaving shackles of habitual conformity and complacency. Defined against habit-as-enabler or habit-as-deadener, shock alternately appears as an assailing or liberating blast. Benjamin himself swung between these seemingly contradictory views on the shock of the new. As we have seen, he decries the modern break with prelapsarian plenitude. At other moments, however, he declares his allegiance with avant-garde efforts to explode the homogeneity of history to make way for radical social change.

Benjamin’s heightened attunement to these two versions of shock—shattering forces that alternately diminish or rejuvenate experience—models a widespread critical approach we might understand as reading for rupture. In a broad sense, to read for rupture is to locate literary sources and symptoms of harrowing (or heroic) breakage.

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5 Beyond this famous phrase, Beckett opens up the multivalent operations of habit in the Recherche. According to his reading, habit can be the source of perceptual paralysis and boredom, but the “suffering of being” is greater when the chaotic “free play of every faculty” is unguided by habits of selective attention (20). Habit can be a shackle, but it can also be a “lightning-conductor”—a channel of creative force and inspiration (19).

6 On the relationship between shock and habit and the avant-garde see Bürger and Schoenbach.
Such an expansive rubric encompasses wide-ranging interdisciplinary and transhistorical work that confronts aesthetic responses to crisis and catastrophe. Exemplars of this kind of reading tend to locate a disjunctive event that decisively divides “before” and “after,” a “now” that is discontinuous with an irretrievable “then.” Within the field of modernist studies, the rhetoric of rupture has provided a powerful paradigm for grappling with the devastation of two world wars, and the upheaval of urban and technological change. The interpretative framework has taken a particularly strong hold in a modernist context because, in Marjorie Perloff’s words, modernism also “perceived its own mission as a call for rupture” (154). Many artists and writers of this period declared themselves to be generating moments of breakage in order to radically transform social and aesthetic experience. The double valence of rupture within modernist art explains why the tropes of shock and habit can alternately assume a negative or positive charge in the work of a writer like Proust as well as a critic like Benjamin. The rhetoric of a radical break serves the modernist artist who wants to establish the newness andnowness of their work against what has come before; it also serves the modernist critic who wants to understand the critical act as one of heroic opposition. Whether modernist art is framed as a symptomatic sign or vehicle of shock, reading for rupture leaves little room to recognize experiences that mediate between polarized extremes.

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7 Susan Stanford Friedman concisely puts it this way: “Modernism requires tradition to ‘make it new.’ Tradition comes into being only as it is rebelled against” or broken down (510).

8 For example, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane’s foundational study Modernism: 1890–1930 (1976) defined modernist literary criticism as a “cultural seismology,” which gauges the interruptive force that is either recorded or produced by the modern “art of crisis” (19; Bradbury, Modern World 7).
The modernist artist and critic’s congruent investments in an oppositional framework provide one explanation for why the rubric of rupture has maintained such diagnostic force in the field. However, the dogged staying power of dichotomies that pit “the modern” against tradition and “the now” against the past is surprising given the strength and longevity of critical rebuttals to the story of modernism-as-break. Indeed the narrative of modernity as an “apocalyptic moment of transition into the new” was already being vigorously interrogated in the decades following Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire (Malcolm and Bradbury 51). By the mid-1960s the “nouveau frisson” had “begun to give way to familiarity: the codification of modernism was now underway” (Perloff 157). For the last half-century, critics have continually returned to a central question: what does it mean to institutionalize explosive shocks and radical revolt as the established norm? \(^9\) \(^10\) \(^11\) \textit{Surprise Encounters} is indebted to a series of studies that reframe this question by examining what Franco Moretti describes as “the range of intermediate possibilities” available to writers who sought to “mitigate [the] extremes” of modern experience instead of exacerbating them (\textit{Signs} 16-17). In the chapters that follow, I

\(^9\) See, for example, Raymond Williams’s “When Was Modernism?” in \textit{The Politics of Modernism}.

\(^10\) As Lisi Schoenbach has recently observed, this question has been posed by multiple generations of modernist critics from Harry Levin, Lionel Trilling, and Raymond Williams, to Rebecca Walkowitz and Douglas Mao (13).

\(^11\) Moretti, for example, seeks an alternative to a dominant Benjaminian model of city experience in an essay on Balzac’s urban novels. Benjamin’s broad application of Freudian shock, he contends, fundamentally misunderstands urban experience by presuming a rigid system of expectations and a singular event that violates them. By contrast, he argues that an unexpected event which takes place in a city is less likely to be isolated and unrepeatable than it is to be a novel amalgam of the known and unknown. He further holds that daily urban life fosters elasticity (rather than rigidity) in the city dweller’s perceptual apparatus (\textit{Signs} 116-17). Studies that have influenced my own work likewise focus on an elastic perceptual receptivity that allows for a non-dualistic responsiveness to modern experience. In particular, two areas of modernist scholarship
examine the work of modernists who investigated the internal contradictions of their own rhetoric of rupture. As the Recherche exemplifies, when shock and habit are understood to be locked in antagonistic relation, their assigned roles as enemy or ally can only be reversed, not altered. Proust demonstrates that the ongoing process of mediating those antagonisms is also a practice of developing habits of surprise.

If Proust’s childhood bedroom provides a touchstone for a shock-centered modernist paradigm, a hotel room visited in the garrison town of Doncières presents an alternative to the rupture-oriented model of reading the Recherche, but also modernism more generally. Critics who read modernist texts as a record of breakdown tend to subsume references to surprise within a rubric of shock, so that the terms serve as synonyms for the assaulting forces that deaden experience. But such an approach misses the care with which Proust and others differentiate a wide range of sudden experiences, which might be disabling or enabling, destructive or creative.

Near the beginning of Le côté de Guermantes, Marcel travels to the military base at Doncières to visit his friend Robert de Saint-Loup. In the Doncières hotel, he expects “to face the world with that ‘self’ which…had never grown up since Combray”—in other words, to be stifled by “the unbreathable aroma which every unfamiliar bedroom…exhaled” (Guermantes 79). While Marcel braces himself “to find it

have guided my inquiry: the fields of pragmatist studies and everyday life studies. Critics who emphasize modernism’s engagement with the ordinary include Olson, Phillips, Randall, and Sheringham. For literary approaches to pragmatism, see Poirier, Posnock, Richardson, and Schoenbach.

12 For example, Benjamin quotes Valéry as evidence that “the category of surprises,” experiences for which we are unprepared, “are evidence of the insufficiency of man” rather than of his capacity (Illuminations 161). Agamben follows Benjamin’s lead in using surprise and shock synonymously to designate those forces that rend “gap[s] in experience” (Infancy 47).
miserable,” as he wonderingly observes upon arrival, “I had no time to be miserable because I was never alone” (79). And yet, since the moment of maternal separation at Combray, the narrator has sought contemplative solitude in each bedroom. In the presence of an unknown person or object, he expects to vacillate between a sense of threat and boredom, foreclosing aesthetic receptivity with an anesthetic response. But in the Doncières hotel, “strangers [étrangères]” and “neighbours [voisins]” are indistinguishable. The room’s inhabitants “acquired a sort of life…real as a colony of people, living in silence, it is true, but which you were obliged to encounter, to avoid, to greet when you returned” (79). The animate objects that populate this “enchanted domain [féerique domaine]” uncannily enmesh familiarity and unfamiliarity:

I was exempted from effort, an exemption usually granted to us only by the things with which long use has made us familiar, the first time I set my feet on those steps, familiar before I even knew them, as if they possessed something which had possibly been left and incorporated in them by former masters whom they used to welcome every day, the prospective charm of habits I had not yet contracted…(80)

When habit is uncoupled from monotonous repetition it allows for contingent contact with the lives of objects that are irreducible to his relation with them. Imprinted by multiple histories of use and residence, the Doncières hotel feels hospitable in its foreignness. The narrator is able to imagine its furnishings as having existences independent of his own, without needing to erase their marks of otherness or put them to work for him. With the objects “released from any practical use” and Marcel relieved of effort, they cohabitate in a communal space of “simply being there” (79). This shared
“thereness” reorients the narrator from past habits towards “prospective” forms of engagement that can’t be anticipated.

Instead of being paralyzed by the shock of new objects at Doncières, the narrator is electrically galvanized by encounters framed in the terms of surprise. For example, as he tours the winding hallways, he is drawn by “a more familiar sense of curiosity in regard to the smaller rooms which, without the least concern for symmetry, ran around it in vast numbers, in amazement [étonnées]” (79). Exploring further, he reports,

behind a hanging curtain I discovered nothing more [je surpris seulement] than a small closet whose escape had been blocked by the other wall, hiding there rather sheepishly, staring at me…I went to the bed, but the presence of the eiderdown, the small columns, the tiny fireplace, heightening my attention beyond its usual pitch in Paris, prevented me from giving myself up to the normal routine of my idle thoughts… (81)

“No longer shut in,” the narrator opens to reciprocal exchanges where his own surprise merges with the sense that the rooms and their furnishings are equally startled by him (80). The bedroom objects resist effacement in their unavoidable “presence,” but their company requires nothing from him beyond simple acknowledgement. Come nighttime, he is tempted to let himself “be dragged back towards [his] usual patterns of memory,” but new points of contact between his body and the bed require a “pleasurable attention” to the altered dimensions of slumber: “The same is true of sleep as of our perception of the external world. It needs only some modification of our habits to make it poetic” (81).

At Doncières, the narrator sidesteps agonistic all-or-nothing models of change to explore the mutual “modifications” that are possible in the middle ranges of experience.
Though his fears of an embattled stay at the hotel are assuaged, it remains significant that the episode unfolds under the sign of conflict. The soldiers rehearsing combat maneuvers outside the hotel window provide a martial backdrop to the narrator’s surprise encounters, which recalls the word’s military origins. In its earliest usage, “surprise” (rooted in the Old French *surprendre*) referred to an unexpected military seizure—the unforeseen capture or overtaking of one force by another (*OED*). Each scene of surprise I will examine follows the pattern laid out in Doncières: the threat of antagonism is introduced only to be averted or attenuated by an unexpected turn of attention. The meaning of surprise has since expanded beyond combat stratagems to encompass events that cannot be anticipated, or for which one is unprepared. The verb “to surprise” means “to ‘take hold of’ or affect suddenly or unexpectedly” (*OED*). An emotional cast inflected its martial etymological roots, so that surprise primarily describes the dynamics of affective forces rather than military forces. As we will see, however, there remains some uncertainty over whether surprise can be counted as an emotion with stable characteristics. The *OED* signals its ambiguous status by defining surprise as “a sudden access of emotion,” rather than an emotional state unto itself. The fact that the same word designates the surprising event and the startled response causes further definitional indeterminacy. Psychologically blurred distinctions between agent and object of surprise are often matched by syntactical indistinctions. In this study, I follow the lead of writers and theorists who maintain this understanding of surprise as an emotional and perceptual opening or moment of access that makes way for a range of possible emotional states—from startled unsettlement, to bewildered amazement, wondering astonishment, to paralyzing shock.
Having dodged the bedroom battle he fears at Doncières, Proust’s narrator finds his perceptual habits reoriented as opposed to ruptured so that new perspectival calibrations become possible. For example, he describes the hotel wallpaper as “a violent red dotted with black and white flowers which suggested they would take some getting used to” (Guermantes 86). But instead of having to subsume the unknown into the known, he enters a space of mutual inhabitation where differences are not collapsed but exchanged: “they affected me as something novel, forcing me not into conflict but into contact with them…imprisoning me in the heart of a sort of poppy from which I viewed the world, quite otherwise than in Paris” (86, my emphasis). Where he might have imposed his subjugating will on the “novel” environment, Marcel embraces the subtle changes those surroundings institute in him. The hotel bedroom objects look back at the Proustian perceiver, engaging him in an ongoing proprioceptive process where activity and passivity, inside and outside find a strange coincidence. Suspended by surprise, the narrator can both observe the hotel room’s flower-printed walls and dwell within “the heart” of poppies that ultimately alter how he “viewed the world” (86).

Proust’s extraordinary attunement to the animated elements of the bedroom’s “enchanted domain [féerique domaine]” exemplifies what Jane Bennett calls a “phenomenology of enchantment” in her polemic against narratives of disenchantment that leave modern life “devoid of surprise” (4). For Bennett as for Proust, “To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday”; it is to be seized by “the surprise element that lurks in every object of experience” (Bennett 4, 94). As the Doncières episode exemplifies, “surprising encounter[s]” can galvanize the perceptual field into a new vision of the world (Bennett
5). However, Proust appears far less confident that this “uneasy combination of charm and disturbance” is guaranteed to mobilize “an energizing feeling of fullness or plenitude—a momentary return to childhood joie de vivre” (Bennett 104). In Proust’s *Recherche*, the “electric charge” of surprise rarely sparks triumphant transformation (Bennett 104). After all, the Doncières episode ends with a phone call from the narrator’s grandmother that leaves him “throbbing with the same anguish [he] had felt in the distant past”—a feeling that bears little resemblance to the “childhood joie de vivre” that Bennett invokes (*Guermantes* 133). But even as she emphasizes spontaneous plenitude, Bennett admits that the surprise-fueled encounters she locates at the heart of modernity are “a precarious concatenation”: “fortuitous circumstances” must conjoin with “deliberate strategies” to bring them to pass (104). *Surprise Encounters* examines the compositional strategies used by a line of literary modernists to “hone a sensory receptivity” in themselves and their readers (Bennett 4). For Proust, as for all of the writers in this study, somatic habits of receptivity are developed and renewed in a practice of reading that palpably extends the practice of living life as “a series of surprises.”

While aesthetic approaches to representing the surprise encounter are remarkably varied, those examined in this study feature temporal contours in common. In each case, the experience of surprise recalibrates the relationship between the past and future according to a distinctive three-fold movement: (1) an unanticipated encounter disrupts a previous pattern of perception, prompting (2) a turn of attention, heightened and attuned to the present moment, as well as (3) a perceptual opening towards unforeseen, perhaps otherwise unforeseeable possibilities of future engagement. The prospective turn projects a vantage from where one can reflect on the present moment as a recollected past that
might be recast or better grasped. In the Doncières bedroom, this elastic web of
anticipatory projections and retrospective reflections renovates the rigid mold of past
perceptual patterns. In this way, the shuttling temporality of surprise opens the vital
(though always provisional) possibility that the future can look different from what
preceded it, and that the past could have assumed a different shape than the one it took.  

The supple continuum of time that shapes modernist representations of surprise
corresponds to the psychological continuum, which theorists since Descartes have drawn
in efforts to make sense of the fluctuating phenomenon that is variously termed a passion,
an affect, and an emotion. From the time that Descartes first counted surprise among the

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13 These formulations are deeply indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conception of
reparative reading, which clears space for the realization “that the future may be different
from the present,” so that the reparatively positioned reader can also entertain such
“ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently
from the way it actually did” (Touching 146).

14 As I will further elaborate in specific discussions of each theorist, I use the terms
“emotion” and “feeling” in accordance with William James’s theory of emotion, while
my references to “affect” will follow Silvan Tomkins’s lead (who is himself working in a
Jamesian tradition). Influenced by this body of work, I contest the rigid distinction that a
poststructuralist strain of affect theory asserts between affects understood as
physiological sensations and emotions understood as psychological states. Rei Terada
neatly distills this mind/body divide when she defines “emotion” as “a psychological, at
least minimally interpretive experience whose physiologic aspect is affect” (5). In
Terada’s work (as in mine), a third term—feeling—mediates between these two domains
of experience. But for other critics working in a Deleuzian tradition, the unstructured,
free-flowing “autonomy” of affect is defined against what Brian Massumi calls “the
tawdry status of a private ‘emotion’”: its enslavement to bounded formations of
signification, “subjective content” and linear narrative (“Too-Blue” 186, “Autonomy”
221). It becomes crucial, Massumi concludes, “to theorize the difference between affect
and emotion” so that “psychological categories” will not “creep back” in, thus “undoing
the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by
poststructuralism” (“Autonomy” 221). The very term “emotion,” as Charles Altieri
observes, has been “contaminated by centuries of association with rhetoric” that equates
it with stationary beliefs, behaviors, and identifications (50). The apparently antithetical
relation between affect and emotion has thus come to rest on precisely the reductive
Cartesian division that it purports to undo, but more often simply inverts. In general, I
primary “passions,” it has spurred debates regarding its duration and strength, its negative or positive charge, and its enabling or inhibiting relationship to perception. The Cartesian continuum of responses to a “sudden and unexpected arrival” distinguishes surprise from wonderment and astonishment on a scale of increasing intensity (Passions 58). He declares wonder to be the “first of all passions” because it yokes our capacity for aesthetic delight with the “serviceable” use-value of making us “learn and retain…things we have previously been ignorant of” (Passions 52, 59). Amplified reactions to “novel objects of the senses” tip the scales away from wonder’s enabling utility towards the dangerous potential for surprise to arrest thinking and acting (Passions 58). For Descartes, surprise immobilizes rather than supports “attention and reflection,” thereby “eradicat[ing] or pervert[ing] the use of reason” (Passions 59-60).

The Cartesian conception of surprise introduced a central tension between gradated continuity and interruptive arrest which has remained central to theorizations that have followed. It was not until Charles Darwin shifted the continuum to place attention and surprise side-by-side rather than on opposite ends that Descartes’s notion of an irrational irruption was issued a meaningful challenge. As Darwin writes in The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872), “attention, if sudden and close, graduates into surprise; and this into astonishment; and this into stupefied amazement”

will take Terada’s cue to use the term “feeling” to signal the integration of psychological and physiological processes that are not reducible to subjectivity, language, or narrative, but are also not entirely divorced from those structures.

15 Psychologists have debated whether surprise is more accurately categorized as an instinctive reflex than as an emotion or affect. Silvan Tomkins holds the full “surprise—startle” range of experience to be properly affective, but his student Paul Ekman goes on to claim that the briefer “startle reactions” are largely reflexive. See Ekman’s “Is the Startle Reaction an Emotion?”

16 Significant slippage occurs between Descartes’s use of the words l’admiration and la surprise.
In the early 1960s, psychologist Silvan Tomkins amended the Darwinian model based on his observation that surprise initiates attention rather than the other way around. In Tomkins’s system of affects, surprise acts as a “circuit breaker” that “orients the individual to turn his attention away from one thing to another” (Affect 273). Surprise plays a role opposite to all the other affects; rather than supplying sensory information, its “resetting” function clears the perceptual apparatus, rendering it freshly receptive to incoming information, but also preventing the immediate coalescence of any interpretable message (Affect 273).

Tomkins’s psychological model of surprise is particularly helpful for understanding the aesthetic conception of surprise as the capacity for affectively charged experiences without any specific affective content. In Tomkins’s schema, surprise has pride of place as the “ancillary to every other affect” (Affect 273). As an auxiliary of the “central assembly” of perception, surprise is less an affect proper than an infrastructure

17 Understood as an adaptive response, surprise is most often categorized as an “orientation reaction” alongside “interest-excitement,” but Tomkins’s account also places equal emphasis on its capacity to disorientate (Affect 503). He argues that Darwin’s stress on surprise’s adaptive use-value neglects its potentially disabling interruptive aspect, which momentarily overwhelms one’s capacity either to continue with the present activity or to initiate a new one. Once surprise’s interruptive force has cleared the perceptual apparatus of all preceding information to make way for new stimuli, that same clearing function can suspend one’s ability to perceptually locate or engage the object of surprise.

18 Adam Frank gives this very concise account of Tomkins’s theory of affects: “Tomkins proposed that humans and other animals have evolved affect systems that are distinct from both the drives and cognition. Humans, according to Tomkins, are born with eight or nine innate affects that act as the primary motives: the negative ones, fear-terror, distress-grief, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, and contempt-disgust; the positive ones, interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy; and the reorienting affect of surprise-startle. These are at once individual and shared; individual in that they are experienced in or on an individual physiology, and shared in that they take place primarily on the skin and musculature of the face and in the tones of the voice and are communicated both to the self and to others, or sometimes to the self as an other” (3).
that gives place to other affects. Its “feeling tone” is relatively neutral, but can be charged with a positive or negative valence depending on the nature of the stimulus and the perceiver’s interpretation of it (Affect 273). Almost immediately, surprise opens onto feelings generated in the process of interpreting what happened in a sudden moment of seizure. Accordingly, the unexpected event can be variously experienced: on the extreme end of the affective continuum it might be felt as a shock, but it could just as easily segue into more middle-ranging experiences of interest, confusion, or anxiousness.

Surprise is so easily confused and conflated with other affects because it has already passed into something else by the time it can be reflected upon. As Paul Ekman observes, “Once you have determined the nature of the surprising event, you are no longer surprised” (Unmasking 35). How then is surprise expressed in all its open-ended immediacy? Darwin, Tomkins, Ekman and others have primarily focused on reading the

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19 Tomkins defines the “central assembly” as “the transmuting mechanism and other components of the nervous system functionally assembled to it at the moment” (Affect 338). Clearing the central assembly for incoming information, surprise plays an opposite role to the eight other affects, which supply the nervous system with information (Affect 498).

20 As is the case for all Tomkinsian affects, surprise names a continuum designated with the hyphenated “surprise-startle.” Surprise’s neutral “feeling tone” shades towards “mildly negative” as one moves closer towards the “startle” end of the scale (Affect 273). This inclination towards negative feeling increases in proportion with the increased rapidity and density of neural firing in response to the sudden, intense stimuli that have triggered surprise-startle in the first place. As greater intensity tips neutral surprise towards negativity, its tendency towards combining with more negatively charged affects such as fear or distress increases. Less intense levels of neural firing lean surprise towards its coalescence with more neutral or positive affects like interest or enjoyment. Tomkins’s elaboration of the Darwinian model has largely defined contemporary understandings of surprise, but also a psychology of affect more generally. See Ekman, Silvia, Scherer.

21 Tomkins’s system of affects is defined by their “freedom to combine” (Shame 45). This freedom defines not only the relationship between the different affects, but also between the different systems that constitute the “central assembly.” Since the affect system “provides the primary motives of human being,” this freedom is necessary to explain the potentially infinite range of human motivators.
signs of surprise that are registered in its distinctive facial expression of raised eyebrows and a dropped jaw. The characteristic surprise utterance is the exclamation “oh!” produced by the open-mouthed intake and audible exhalation of air. This quasi-linguistic vocalization calls attention to the visceral materiality of language that blurs the boundary between articulate speech and involuntary sound, merging bodily and linguistic expression.

Studies of the language of emotion have tended to set articulations of surprise apart from other emotional expressions. Its uniqueness is attributed to the fact that it lacks specific content and strangely intermingles interruption with integration. Psycholinguist Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky designates surprise a “super-emotion” on the basis that it exemplifies the “gradient” nature of “emotive language in general” (156). She examines expressions of surprise on an “iconicity-conventionality scale” that ranges from spontaneous interjections and exclamations to fixed idioms and euphemisms. The quasi-onomatopoeic “oh” sound has proven to be strongly iconic, “expressing the emotion experienced by a speaker faced by a sudden, unexpected turn of events” with “possible universality” (158). As one moves towards the “conventional” end of the scale, the linguistic signs of surprise pass from a direct reaction into a retrospective response: “the speaker reports his/her emotional (positive or negative) reaction to a new state of affairs” with formulaic phrases like “I can’t believe it!” or “is that so?” (163). Kryk-Kastovsky’s enumeration of common lexical constructions of surprise supports Ekman’s contention

22 The mouth opens as the jaw relaxes and drops, which Darwin posits to be an effect of energy being siphoned from unused sensory apparatuses (i.e. taste and vocalization) that momentarily slacken or halt in order to concentrate the energy around the more immediately vital apparatuses of visual and aural attention. See Tomkins, Affect 273, 279; Darwin 278-289; Ekman, Unmasking 37-45
that we can only declare ourselves surprised after the fact. In a study of preposition use in the language of emotion, Meredith Osmond explains that we are surprised “at” rather than “with” something because the latter preposition implies duration, whereas the “surprise group” of emotional expressions only refer to “the moment of discovery of some situation,” which “cannot be prolonged at will or recreated by recalling the moment of impact” (114). The psychological and psycholinguistic accounts of the visceral but fleeting experience of surprise and its necessarily belated expression have important implications for aesthetic forms of engagement with it. To represent surprise in a literary form means finding a language for an experience that exceeds reflection and expression as it takes place, and which cannot be recreated through recollection. In narrative terms, the representation of surprise requires a refractive temporal syntax that protracts the instantaneous, but also a phenomenological lexicon that traverses the uncertain threshold between inner and outer.

As demonstrated in Doncières, the phenomenological uncertainty of this traversal alters the way the narrator “views the world.” In an earlier essay entitled “On Reading” [“Sur la lecture”] (1906), Proust establishes the centrality of surprise encounters to his theory of reading. Proust roots his theory in the practice of reading he began to develop in the childhood room where he would retire with a book after mealtimes (On Reading 26). Significantly, the autobiographical bedroom he details resembles Doncières rather than Combray. As in the Doncières bedroom, Proust’s sense of “simply being there”
interpenetrates with “lives profoundly different” than his own, plunging him “into the depths of the non-ego” (Guermantes 79, On Reading 17). “Full to the brim with the soul of others,” the young Marcel enjoys solitude without isolation (On Reading 19). This immersive feeling of being alone in another’s company is coextensive with a field of perception cultivated by reading. In the bedroom, he learns to bring the same acutely responsive attention to literary encounters and object encounters. Having evocatively recalled a series of surprise encounters with books and objects from his youth, Proust reveals the essay’s primary motive. His aim is to recreate in the mind of the reader “the original psychological act called reading with enough force for him to be able to follow now, as if within himself,” the theory of reading that he goes on to propose. Proust thus confers on the bedroom scene a tutelary power to “awaken” in his audience a receptivity displayed by the figure of the young Marcel. Just as Proust keeps solitary company with bedroom objects, the act of reading “allow[s] the impetus of another mind to be received in the midst of solitude” (On Reading 41). But what privileges the encounter with a book over encounters with other things is that reading allows for “an intervention which, while coming from another, takes place in our own innermost selves” (On Reading 40).

In childhood, Proust effortlessly gives himself over to this “foreign intervention [intervention étrangère]” (On Reading 41). However, he resists idealizing the youthful reader, whose uninhibited receptivity is not yet paired with reflection. It is only over time that a reader learns to take the author’s “Conclusions” as his “Incitements”—the start-point rather than the end-goal of reading. “To maintain the mind’s full, fruitful work on itself” in reading is to practice a “discipline” of attention over the course of life (On Reading 31, 39). Proust outlines habits of attention that shuttle between “our innermost
self [la fond au nous-même]” and “another mind [un autre esprit]”—between what is most intimate and most remote (On Reading 40). To avoid unreflective communion as an end unto itself, the reader must attune himself to the discrepancies as well as the congruencies between his consciousness and the book. Proust stresses the strangeness of an encounter that is as much an invasion as a reciprocal exchange. Resisting our efforts to “penetrate” its depths, the book turns us back on our “innermost self,” but also points us outward to the world beyond its pages: “that mist which our eager eyes would like to pierce is the last word of the painter’s art…he tells us… Look! Learn how to see!” (On Reading 37). The act of reading, in other words, will ideally provoke perception and set “creative activity in motion” (On Reading 43).

As “Sur la lecture” reveals, Proust’s conception of books as creative instigators rather than static idols finds an unexpected source in Emerson. Proust warns against an all-consuming absorption that displaces the world with “a beautiful Platonic myth” and replaces volition with a neurasthenic “impossibility of willing [une sorte d’impossibilité de vouloir]” (On Reading 41). At the end of a long passage outlining such dangers, Proust compares Emerson to the archetypal literary guide. Just as Virgil led Dante “to the threshold of paradise,” Emerson acts as an “initiator whose magic keys open to our..."
innermost selves the doors into which we would not have known how to penetrate” (*On Reading* 43). Aligning Emerson with the tutelary figure of Virgil, Proust figures himself as a modern Dante who is led to probe his own depths rather than dropping into the pits of hell. Tellingly Emerson’s own source of creative “stimulus” is Plato (*On Reading* 41). Instead losing himself in the realm of abstracted Platonic forms, his reading is “at once essential and limited”: Emerson “rereads some pages of Plato,” Proust observes, for the sole purpose of beginning to write (*On Reading* 35, 43). Indeed the whole of “Sur la lecture” is evidence that Proust has internalized Emerson’s central tenets of reading understood as a spur for writing; the reader-writer is instructed to absorb books “actively and not passively; to esteem his own life as the text, and books the commentary” (*EL* 239).

For Proust, as for Emerson, learning to read one’s “own life as the text” means learning to read for surprise. The self we are turned back on, whose depths we probe, is a profoundly unsettled self. I have introduced surprise by way of Proust’s bedroom, but as I will elaborate in Chapter One, those Proustian contingencies of time, perception, and selfhood can be traced back to his reading of Emerson. And as we will see in the chapters that follow, to track the temporal and perceptual turns of Emersonian surprise through two of his most famous and enigmatic essays, “Circles” (1841) and “Experience” (1844), is also to begin to untangle the convolutions of Jamesian syntax, Steinian grammar, and Larsen’s indeterministic approach to plot and character. At the opening and close of “Experience,” Emerson affirms “Surprise” as a “lord of life”—a guide to living, writing, and reading that provides at least one interpretive frame for the essay’s opening query: “Where do we find ourselves?” (*EL* 469, 491, 471). The immediate response to the
disorienting question—“In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none”—only exacerbates the reader’s uncertainties (EL 471). But it also offers clues as to how we might proceed: without any guarantees, but with a belief in the “middle region of our being” (EL 480). As Emerson reinforces, “the mid-world is best” (EL 481). This opening invocation of seriality without extremity resonates with a hinge phrase at the heart of “Experience”: “Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not.” Such a life is powered by “a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great” and “by pulses…undulatory and alternate.”

Continuing in the same paragraph, Emerson writes: “We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual” (EL 483). In the movement from “casualties” to the “casual,” he recalls the etymological evolution of the word surprise: the life-and-death stakes of a military attack are conjoined with passing, incidental, or seemingly insignificant events.

While “Experience” is famously written in the wake of his son Waldo’s death, Emerson resists fixation on the singularity of that loss and on time past. His theory of life understood as a series of surprises insists on the multiplicity of “uncalculated and uncalculable” events that move us into the future (EL 483). The serial nature of events is cast and recast by successive moods that change our perception from one instant to the next: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass though them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue” (EL 473). The seriality and successiveness of experience is at once the source of life’s continuity and the newness of every lived moment. Each passing mood, distinct and fleeting, is connected by an unbroken lineament that moves us “Onward and onward!” (EL 486). Even as
Emerson grieves the “death of [his] son, more than two years ago,” he comes to the powerful realization that the “flux of moods” and the flow of time cannot be stilled, even “when we clutch hardest” (EL 485, 473). This insistent onwardness makes our life seem “not present, so much as prospective” (EL 486). As a “lord of life,” surprise is laced through experience; at the end of the essay, Emerson identifies it as a thread on “the loom of time” (EL 490). Its open weave supports a posture of responsiveness that allows Emerson decisively to declare at the essay’s close, “All I know is reception” (EL 485).

Emerson first articulates his central claim that “life is a series of surprises” in “Circles” (EL 413). In this essay, the paradoxical temporality of surprise—a convergence of instantaneity and “incessant movement”—is expressed and enacted by the essay’s spiraling figures and sentences (EL 412). The essay begins with a vertigo-inducing claim: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (EL 403). The essay itself is an exercise in “reading the copious sense of this first of forms” as it dilates from “a ring imperceptibly small…to a new and larger circle…to immense and innumerable expansions” (EL 403, 404, 405). Our orbit of vision expands to the point that “There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us” (EL 405). As in “Experience,” the essay’s disorienting opening statement comes full circle to give the final word to surprise:

The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle…The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment. (EL 414)
Drawing a new circle depends on being surprised out of our propriety—on unsettling the proper as it pertains to social and linguistic conformity, but also to subjectivity more generally. Just as Emerson denies delimiting rules of decorum and language usage, he resists the idea of essential properties belonging to a stable subject. For the “experimenter” and “endless seeker,” there is no proper self to claim as one’s own (EL 412).

In “Circles,” Emerson associates surprise with an immersive experience of self-loss or self-forgetting. Echoing the passage just cited, Stanley Cavell writes, “the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving. Then everything depends on your realization of abandonment” (Etudes 19). But if a new circle of surprise is contingent upon the abandonment of conscious thought and directive action, how is it to be drawn? While Emerson refrains from programmatic recommendations, it is not by accident that he pairs “Use and Surprise” in the poem that opens “Experience.” In “Circles,” the “use” of surprise is coextensive with the “use of literature” (EL 408). The act of reading “afford[s] us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we move it” (EL 408). In other words, “literature is a point outside of our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may

25 On abandonment and leaving in Emerson also see Sharon Cameron’s “The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson’s Impersonal” and Branka Arsić’s On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson.

26 The epigraphic poem begins like this:
    The lords of life, the lords of life,—
    I saw them pass,
    In their own guise,
    Like and unlike,
    Portly and grim,—
    Use and Surprise,
    Surface and Dream,
    Succession swift and spectral Wrong… (EL 459)
be described” (*EL* 408). Literary reading provides, in short, perspective. In the all-consuming moment of lived surprise, “there is no outside” (*EL* 405). Reflection is only possible through a belated process of trying to remember what happened in the moment we forgot ourselves. “We value the poet” because his representation of the experience allows us to be within but also slightly to the side of the circle drawn, to feel surprise and to reflect on the feeling as we inhabit it (*EL* 406).

Beyond these two foundational essays, surprise manifests itself across Emerson’s vast body of work as a signature of time and of syntax. He describes and enacts the experience of surprise in sentences that turn on themselves and on one another. Whether the Emersonian turn is articulated in spatial or temporal terms, it tends to mark a point of transition where the relationship between the past and the future, the concrete and the abstract remains undecided—and perhaps undecidable. His sentences continually dilate from a discrete detail to an expansive horizon, or just as often, contract from vast generality to minutiae close at hand: “I am a God in nature; I am a weed by the wall” (*EL* 406). The surprise of such a sentence is in its vertiginous leap from a wide, distant abstraction back to “the near, the low, the common” (*EL* 68). But the bewildering scalar shift is counterbalanced by the parallel construction of the formulation. When we give equal weight to its parts, “our little circles absorb us and occupy us as fully as the heavens” (Emerson qtd. by Tanner 28). God and the weed are recognized as one and the same.

The Emersonian time of living and writing “absorbs past and future into the present hour” (*EL* 270). He is often taken to be disavowing the past, but in fact, his conception of “an everlasting Now” requires an unending process of “transition from a
past to a new state” (*EL* 271). At transitional moments we turn back to what has come before in order to turn to face what is yet to come. The present becomes an envelope for retrospection and prospection. If surprise is a thread on the loom of time, its “warp and woof are past and future” (*Society* 163). Accordingly, the role of the writer and scholar is to “take up into himself all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future” (*EL* 70). Having gathered the lineaments of time into himself, his task is (in Richard Poirier’s terms) “to refloat the world, to make it less stationary and more transitional, to make descriptions of it correspondingly looser, less technical, more uncertain” (*Poetry* 40). The metaphor of floating is particularly apt for describing the “transitional, alternating” movement of surprise throughout Emerson’s essays (*EL* 641). He mobilizes images of maritime and atmospheric drift, which James, Stein, and Larsen will all take up in their respective representations of surprise. For example in the following formulation, he describes the “splendid novelty” of art that synthesizes or balances polarized extremes—“a thread” that twines “two strands”: “The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea” (*EL* 641). From a vantage suspended between departure and arrival one can inhabit both points of view. For Branka Arsić, this line captures “a moment when everything has been left (the shore), but nothing has been gained or attained.” She evocatively describes a state of open-endedness, which I ascribe to the experience of surprise: “everything is still possible, and all meanings are equally true, for nothing is yet decided” (*On Leaving* 88). It is precisely this floating feeling that each writer seeks in what Emerson describes as the surprise “event.”

Who is equipped with the resources to answer Emerson’s call for unrelenting unsettlement? It may seem as though only those who enjoy a contemplative life
supported by independent means—those like Proust, James, and Stein—have the luxury of suspending themselves in contingency in the way he demands. Surprising the self out of its propriety can sound like a solipsistic endeavor, available only to a very few. But as Emerson maintains, as long as we inhabit an “uncalculated and uncalculable” universe, we are inherently exposed to chance and risk (EL 483). Practices of reading and writing for surprise are presented as primary means of coping with such radical instability. As we will see in Chapter One, William James advises his audience of teachers and students that reading Emerson serves as preparation for accommodating the challenge of living in a world that brims over with uncertainty. Both Emerson and James ask their readers and listeners to make an “ethical and practical” choice in the face an unknown future: the choice between obeying dogmatic orthodoxy and abandoning oneself to demands for responsive action in the absence of fixed rules or criteria (EL 407). If ethics are defined by the possibility of choosing, the central choice for Emerson is between acting in conformity or acting out of surprise—between clinging to false certainties or doing “something without knowing how or why” (EL 414). On the one hand, Emerson is acutely aware of the psychological, social, and material constraints on the freedom of such a choice. On the other hand, the very possibility of “ethical reformation” depends on following an unknown course of action (EL 256). David Robinson writes, “this affirmation of the ethical imperative to act, even within the framework of a less than absolute surety, is a fundamental premise of his later thought” (and, as Eduardo Cadava amends, in all his writing) (Robinson qtd. in Cadava 69). Emerson regularly compares the ethical to the laws of nature in order to dispel the illusion of immutable principles; both
are subject to the unpredictable movements of time and history. Just as “there is no end in nature,” there is no such thing as a final ethical position (EL 403).

Surprise has had a contested function in discussions of readerly ethics over the past few decades. Since J. Hillis Miller instantiated the phrase, an “ethics of reading” in the late 1980s (with a book with that title), the experience of surprise has defined what it means to read ethically in a deconstructive literary line. As Barbara Johnson succinctly puts it, a reading practice is ethical “to the extent that it encounters and propagates the surprise of otherness.” Ethical reading requires exceptional closeness between the critic and the object of criticism, even while emphasizing that any fullness of encounter with the “other” remains “impossible” (World 15). At the same time that Hillis Miller and others were popularizing a literary ethics of surprise, D.A. Miller argued that “Surprise—the recognition of what one ‘never suspected’—is precisely what the paranoid seeks to eliminate” (164). In The Novel and the Police (1988) he explicates and performs a way of reading that has variously been dubbed “suspicious,” “symptomatic” or “paranoid.”

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the primary legacy of what Paul de Man first termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is a critical form of attention “averse above all to surprise” (Touching 146). To avoid the expected, the critical object is held at a deliberate distance that allows for detached but all-seeing surveillance. Whether surprises are to be proliferated or excised, ethical and symptomatic models of reading unexpectedly overlap where they privilege disclosures yielded in moments of revelatory exposure.

In recent years, a growing number of literary critics have sought alternatives to a practice of symptomatic reading, which Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best have usefully defined as “a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text’s truest meaning lies in what
it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings” (1). The critical impulse towards detecting and unveiling hidden or repressed meanings requires a diagnostic framework which often dictates in advance what the critic expects to find. Since suspicious readers don’t want to be caught off-guard, any unforeseen phenomena are necessarily bad surprises. It’s not hard to see how a symptomatic methodology easily falls into lockstep with a Benjaminian brand of vigilance. Reading in a suspicious mood within a Freudian framework of trauma means anticipating shocks at every textual turn. A critical rubric of rupture has a protective function insofar as it allows the critic to preempt shocks and thus diffuse their force; identified in advance, a shock might be uncovered without being felt. In this way, the act of interpretation is separated from affective experience.

One reason symptomatic reading is so widely practiced is because the protocols of exposure can be trained and replicated. Further, the dramatic act of unveiling—especially a spectacle like shock—is easy to recognize and affords esteem to the critic (Marcus and Best 1). As Sedgwick attests, suspicious procedures intended to avert surprises are “nothing if not teachable” (Touching 136). By contrast, critics like Johnson, Gayatri Spivak, and Jane Gallop routinely attest to the pedagogical paradoxes of cultivating surprise as the basis of a literary ethics. If, by definition, surprises cannot be anticipated and may well have morphed into something else by the time they register, how might the practice of reading for them be practiced and taught? “Set[ting] oneself up to be surprised, as Johnson frames it, is an “impossible but necessary task” (World 15). Her own deconstructionist approach to the undertaking involves fostering “a new form of ignorance”: it is only when we willfully forget what we know how to do “that knowledge
can go on making accessible to us the surprise of an otherness we can only encounter in the moment of suddenly discovering we are ignorant of it” (World 15-16). In the same vein, Gallop advises that we work against our preconceptions by focusing on the “surprising” details of a text. This means “giving up the comfort of the familiar, of the already-known, for the sake of learning, of encountering something new, something [the reader] didn’t already know” (“Ethics of Reading” 11). To open oneself to surprise, according to Spivak, is to “encounter the many-leveled, unfixable intricacy and openness of a work of literature”; it is to suspend oneself “in the text of the other” (“World” 671, “Righting” 532).

As each of these critics makes clear, a literary ethics of surprise is not a goal that finds a final resting place when achieved. Construed as an event and a task, reading opens the way for an “ethical call that may or may not happen,” but is always to come, without guaranteed arrival (Spivak, Live Theory 107). When asked about her approach to teaching “literary reading,” Spivak responded, “One can’t plan to be ethical…It surprises you, it is unexpected, you cannot plan the lack of coercion…it’s not that you’re being ethical, it’s that the ethical might flower…” (Live Theory 119). On the one hand, the desire for ethical achievement risks instrumentalization, just as cultivated habits of surprise seem to suggest routinized predictability. There can be no set strategy for fostering or modeling surprise encounters with “the singular and the unverifiable” (“Righting” 532). On the other hand, these critics and teachers are deeply invested in an ethics of reading that can be taught and practiced. But the pedagogical potential of their formulations is limited by a definitional tautology between surprise and ethics: to read ethically is to allow oneself to be surprised; to be open to surprise is to allow for an ethical encounter. The ethical
imperative to foster surprise at first seems diametrically opposed to the paranoid agenda of eliminating surprise. Yet, in the call for infinite accountability to an unfathomable other we might also hear echoes of a suspicious reader’s motto, “you can never be paranoid enough” (Touching 142).

One way to break open this tautology is to retrieve a pedagogy of surprise from the sublimity of post-structuralist ethics. Anne-Lise François has identified the call for “infinite, never-to-be-satisfied ethical responsibility” as a postmodern inheritance of the romantic sublime, which likewise requires an endless responsiveness to what is unrepresentable (xvii). An aesthetics of the sublime, like an aesthetics of shock, goes hand-in-hand with the high stakes of exposure and revelation. The romanticized work of the critic is to reveal, to uncover, to express the inexpressible. As François argues, Romanticism’s emphasis on the heroic work of the imagination has a legacy in critical models that only recognize value in labored recoveries and dramatic disclosures (xvii). If the practice of reading for surprise is threatened by hostilities towards the unexpected and by the reductive impulse to treat all experiences of suddenness as shocks, it is equally challenged by a potentially paralyzing overemphasis on the extremity and unattainability of the ethical demand. I have found, however, that the subjects of this study are more interested in the indefinite than the infinite, the uncertain than the unfathomable. As each chapter will elaborate, Emerson, Baudelaire, James, Stein, and Larsen cultivate an ethos of contingency that deviates from the trajectories of revelation or redemption. Like Proust, these writers render scenes of surprise, but they also assume the position of reader. For example, James’s prefaces to the New York Edition and Stein’s Lectures in America both return to the authors’ own oeuvres with the aim of cultivating a reading
experience that is shaped by surprise in the same way they describe the process of writing as having been. For these writers, an art of composition governed by surprise will ideally foster a practice of reading for surprise.

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Emerson’s often-overlooked importance for Benjamin’s exemplary recorders of shock provides the starting point for this project and for a transatlantic remapping of modernism. As I demonstrate in Chapter One, Baudelaire’s and Proust’s modernist hallmarks actively engage with the Emersonian temporality of an “everlasting Now” (Society 167). In the *Recherche*, Proust draws on Emerson’s Neoplatonic vision of an infinitely renewable universe where pattern and uncertainty partake of one another. An Emersonian desire to fuse timelessness with instantaneity is evident not only in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, but also in the *correspondances* Baudelaire draws between the immutable and the ephemeral. In “Le peintre de la vie moderne” Baudelaire identifies Emerson as a transatlantic representative of the modern era whose influence stretches beyond the confines of nineteenth-century New England into the cosmopolitan center of Paris. I argue that Baudelaire’s urban wanderer—the quintessential figure of European modernity—has an American source in Emerson’s poet-walker, a fact that confirms the crucial importance of this intercontinental exchange. To conclude, I contend that Emerson’s intercontinental reach was matched by his interdisciplinary reach. Just as Baudelaire and Proust looked to Emerson for training in fresh perceptual habits, William James identified Emersonian surprise as the foundation of a practical philosophy of education and experience.

In Chapter Two, I trace Henry James’s trajectory from an economy of shock in his first expatriate novels, to a more integrative model of surprise in his last three
completed novels of consciousness. By pitting America against Europe and innocence against experience, James initially constructs his novels according to the oppositional logic that subtends shock modernism. For example, an early work like *The American* (1877) stages a cultural collision between a new-world sense of wonder and a shock-saturated Old World. Around the same time James was developing the naïve American hero Christopher Newman, his critical writings characterize Emerson as a similarly unworldly innocent. By contrast *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, which epitomize the dense and fully realized style of James’s late phase, are organized around surprise encounters between representatives of each continent. The protagonists of the three novels partake of the same “responsive sensibilities” that his brother William James so revered in Emerson (*WI* 856). Reading Emerson, as William affirmed, can facilitate a “recognizant” turn towards those contingencies intrinsic to a world of chance (*WI* 862). Henry’s late novels draw on the fluid images of flow used by his brother to describe the unpredictable “stream of experience,” but he goes further in his struggle to find a syntax that is expressive of endless flux. I map the convolutions of his increasingly elaborate sentences around the distinctive temporal pivot of surprise. Henry James’s acrobatic shuttling between past and future tenses and interior and exterior space carves out a shared ground of experience where the borders between the known and unknown become a commutable frontier of open potential.

Chapter Three examines the habits of attention that Stein developed in response to the sudden onslaught of fame and notoriety in early 1930s. While critics have focused on the influence of William James’s psychology on Stein, I argue that it is Henry James who provides her with a model of consciousness that is at once permeable and protective in
the face of an unprecedented audience. Indeed, when Stein asserts that Henry James was “doing what American literature had always done,” I understand her to be saying that his conduct of life, inseparable from a conduct of composition, can be traced back to the source of literary surprise that we find in Emerson (Writings 56). In her chapter on Henry James in *Four in America*, Stein establishes the writer’s capacity to merge spontaneous receptivity with militant discipline as a touchstone for her own mode of composition. Only with such a robust yet flexible infrastructure of attention in place can Stein develop the improvisational practice of “feel[ing] writing,” which she defines as “beginning again and again” with each new sentence in “a continuous present” (“Pictures” 243, Writings 27). Like James, Stein answers the Emersonian call for endless renewal by preparing herself to be surprised by the unexpected. Yet Stein’s famously difficult lexical repetitions and variations go even further than James’s in challenging the sustained attention of her readers.

“Our moods do not believe in each other,” writes Emerson, and in Chapter Four I examine how Nella Larsen’s novel bears him out (EL 406). Since *Quicksand’s* (1928) publication at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, critics have been confounded by the inexplicable mood swings that fuel protagonist Helga Crane’s transatlantic traversals. This chapter develops an Emersonian climatology of moods as a guide for drawing critical connections between the shifting transience of Helga Crane’s humors and the shifting weather patterns that backdrop her movements. The novel’s changes in mood and weather converge in a series of “atmospheric events” that index the limits and possibilities of narrative surprise in the novel form (Arsić 145). I locate Larsen’s novelistic surprise in the drifting clouds that model Helga’s amorphous mutability. But
the novel also unexpectedly imposes overdetermined plot closure which underlines the fossilizing narrative logic of race and reproduction. Even more baffling than *Quicksand*’s incomprehensible central character is the incongruous ending that suddenly subjugates Helga’s plot-defying itinerancy to constrictive convention. *Quicksand*’s stock ending is startling precisely because the reader has learned to expect open-endedness in place of typical closure.

The weather offers a more general figure for the permeating presence of surprise in the novels and essays that are featured in this study. As a facet of narrative time, its appearance can remain barely discernible, hovering between sentences and at the fringes of scenes. As a structure of attention, its floating openness can be quickly overtaken by more directive or demanding dimensions of experience. The designation of surprise as “Emersonian” only anchors this nebulosity in an equally amorphous figure. As Irving Howe has argued, “to confront American culture is to feel oneself encircled by a thin but strong presence: a mist, a cloud, a climate.” For Howe, the term “Emersonian” evokes the “dominant spirit in the national experience” (1). In *Surprise Encounters*, Emerson’s national importance is secondary to the broad transatlantic reach of his conceptions of time and perception. His pervasive yet elusive idea of surprise moves atmospherically through the work of each writer in this study; it circulates as an ambient mood and feeling rather than as a locatable source of influence. If Emersonian surprise constitutes an indeterminate opening with indefinite effects, what might be the value of exploring its aesthetic representation? For writers who understand writing to be an extension of living, it is a matter of remaining vitally responsive to a universe that offers fewer guarantees than the weather.
Chapter One
Reading for Surprise

“No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”
—Robert Frost

What does it mean to read for surprise? This chapter examines the work of three writers who read Emerson in order to foster an exceptional openness to the uncertainty that comes with living in a world of chance: Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, and William James. By tracing three facets of Emersonian surprise—experiential, formal, and pedagogical—through the work of these writers, I demonstrate that an investment in the unexpected was central not only to transatlantic modernism but also to interdisciplinary discussions addressing the role of attention and emotion in education at the turn of the twentieth century. In the first part of the chapter, I argue that Emerson’s conception of time and perception crucially informed concepts of modernity usually attributed to Baudelaire and Proust. While Baudelaire is often given pride of place as the first modern poet, he himself looks to Emerson for his model of the modern artist. Reading Emerson’s first series of Essays in the 1840s and The Conduct of Life in the 1860s, Baudelaire’s conceptions of modern experience and the modern self were entirely reshaped.¹ Just as Emerson endeavors to fuse the fleeting with the timeless in his conception of an “everlasting Now,” Baudelaire locates correspondances between the “transitory” and

¹ Baudelaire defines “modernity” as the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable” (“Painter” 403). For Emerson’s influence on Baudelaire see Gilman, Howells, Marchi, and especially Arsić.
“the Eternal” in his poetry and critical writings on modernity.² The distinctive temporal order of “a present, which is infinite” finds a fresh permutation in Proust’s mémoire involontaire (EL 394). As we will see, Proustian memory is only a form of retrospection to the extent that it partakes of Emerson’s notion of a prospective present. I bring together the two writers’ models of composition—Emerson’s “method of nature” and Proust’s method of modernism—to show how both were shaped by a Neoplatonic pedagogy of perception.³ The two writers find a tutelary figure in common in the ancient philosopher of everyday life, Plotinus. Each writer answers what Pierre Hadot has described as Plotinus’s call for “a conversion of attention,” where “conversion” comes not in an epiphanic moment of transcendence, but rather though a rigorous regime of daily perceptual training (Hadot 30). Far from affording an escape from daily living, Plotinus’s spiritual exercises provide Emerson and Proust with a means of more thoroughly inhabiting the existing material world.

To conclude this chapter I establish the centrality of Emersonian surprise to a pedagogical tradition dedicated to teaching students to inhabit what William James describes as “the instant field of the present” (WII 1175). I demonstrate how James’s reading of Emerson mobilized his psychological theories of emotion and attention into a practical philosophy of education and experience that began to crystallize in his “Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals” (1899). The seemingly disparate sensibilities of Baudelaire, Proust, and James converge on a common understanding of reading as a means of training perceptual habits of surprise, which in

² Arsić has underlined distinctive resemblances between the two writers’ attunement to the “fugitive element” of fleeting encounters that punctuate daily life (On Leaving 77-79).
³ Emerson delivered a lecture by that name in 1841.
each case means cultivating a posture of introspective receptivity. These writers and thinkers look to Emerson to question what it means to prepare oneself for the unexpected without dwelling in preconception. By mapping the wide historical and interdisciplinary reach of surprise through the twentieth century, I show how a literary and intellectual legacy of surprise has powerfully and persistently structured psychic and cultural responses to modernity.

Much has been made of the formative influence that Emerson’s 1833 visit to Paris had on his method of composition. However, relatively little attention has been paid to his influence on French writers and thinkers. The few critics who have noted that Baudelaire and Proust were readers of Emerson have tended to diminish the importance of their engagement with his writing. As a result, the striking congruencies between Emerson’s conception of composition and their modernist signatures have been largely overlooked. As Emerson’s fame was spreading across America he was introduced to France by Émile Montégut’s 1847 essay “Un Penseur et poète américain,” published in Revue des deux mondes. Three years later, Montégut translated Emerson’s first series of essays and Baudelaire’s initial contact with Emerson came shortly after the release of Essais de philosophie américaine (1851). Proust likely first encountered Emerson in I. Will’s translation of Sept essais d’Emerson (1894), with a preface by Maurice Maeterlinck. Though Baudelaire’s and Proust’s early writings immediately registered the decisive impact of these publications, their reading of the American writer would evolve over the course of their careers so that its most powerful impact was belated.

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4 I. Will is the pseudonym of the critic Marie Mali.
In the case of Baudelaire, critics have held up Emerson as “a mentor, a guide in the conduct of life” at a moment of “moral and psychological crisis” (Gilman 220, Howells, “Great Men” 481). The first critic to bring the two writers together, Margaret Gilman, concludes that Emerson’s influence was “exclusively private and personal” rather than aesthetic or formal (220). This opinion has held firm among the few critics over the last half century who have revisited Baudelaire and Emerson’s relationship. In the case of Proust, Emerson’s influence is generally associated with pre-Recherche juvenilia. As evidence of an early mentorship that is soon outgrown, scholars point to Proust’s multiple citations of Emerson in early writings and correspondence, followed by a single mention of the American in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Indeed, if we attend only to Proust’s direct references to Emerson, it is difficult to contest a standard critical trajectory that moves from youthful, Emersonian romanticism toward the mature modernism of the *Recherche*. Tantalizingly, Proust’s biographer Jean-Yves Tadié reports that from his deathbed, on his final night of living, the writer paraphrased Emerson from memory: “There’s nothing so frivolous as dying” (Tadié 777). Though this anecdote suggests that Proust engaged with Emerson to the end of his life, it does little to dislodge the New Englander’s image as a mere dispenser of pithy aphorisms. In returning to Proust and Baudelaire’s reading of Emerson I want to challenge the conventional view that Emerson is an acceptable guide to living but not to writing, and further, to align Emerson’s contours of time and perception with their hallmarks of modernism.

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5 Proust used four selections from Emerson as epigraphs in the essays collected in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, cited him twice in *Jean Santeuil*, made six references in *Pastiches et Mélanges*, and made various mentions in personal letters and a book review. On Proust’s reading of Emerson, see Murphy.
The dearth of scholarship on the formal and conceptual affinities between Emerson and the French writers bespeaks a broader tendency to isolate Emerson’s insights on a conduct of life from their style and construction, which is perceived to be lacking in artistry. Since the 1970s, scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Julie Ellison, Joel Porte, Sharon Cameron, and Richard Poirier have contested the popular portrait of a formally naïve prophet of romantic individualism and idealism by elucidating the richly resonant textures of Emerson’s writing. In many cases this critical turn hinges on Emerson’s account of the way his dynamic writing process developed out of his encounter with George Cuvier’s taxonomic “cabinets of natural history” in Paris’s Jardin des plantes.⁶ According to Emerson’s multiple accounts of the visit to the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, it was here that he learned to read nature as a language of strange surprises. The task of the writer, as he construed it, was to translate nature’s startling signs in all their animated immediacy. The lessons he learned from reading nature, Baudelaire and Proust would learn from reading Emerson. Baudelaire’s “painter of modern life” and Proust’s modern writer thus share a common silhouette with Emerson’s naturalist-poet.

On the day of the museum visit Emerson’s journal entry opens with an affirmation of the exhibition that signals its seminal importance for the future of his writing. “How much finer things are in composition than alone,” Emerson effuses as he wanders in rapt attention from the botanical garden, to the ornithological exhibit, to the mineral display. The “beautiful collection,” he exclaims in the gallery of birds, enlarges

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⁶ My reading of this visit owes a particular debt to Brown’s *The Emerson Museum* and Richardson’s chapter “Emerson’s Moving Pictures” in *The Natural History of Pragmatism*, and Murphy’s chapter in *Proust in America* titled “The Impossible Possible Philosophers’ Man.”
“the limits of the possible” (*Emerson in His Journals* 110). Moving through the exhibits, Emerson is struck by the sense that nature’s “composition” has been decoded into a universal text that he had previously only glimpsed. As Lee Rust Brown contends, Emerson found himself reading “a version of precisely the kind of writing to which he had long aspired” (60). The cabinets’ ordering principles provide him with a formal template for the voluminous notebooks he had kept for the past eight years. Emerson’s journals are recast as a collection of specimens to be composed and recomposed over the course of his career. If life is a “series of surprises,” so too is the quarry of writings that he mined until the end of his life.

“Composition,” as Emerson defines it, is the construction of a “living chain” (*Emerson in His Journals* 139). But the method of nature he discovers at the museum does not confirm any great chain of being. Instead he discerns vast webs of association formed by tenuous filaments of connection. The unpredictable linkages forged between nature’s forms are dictated by chance and accident rather than by predetermined design. Emerson mimes the transitive movements of the natural world by weaving the animating threads of his notebooks—a collection of musings, quotations, drafts of poems, personal reflections, critical insights, and other miscellany—into contingent, processual patterns. The connective links holding together his essays and indeed his oeuvre are conditional rather than causal, speculative rather than definitive. Each of Emerson’s sentences renews a propositional “what if?” that speaks to the absence of any overarching plan in nature, or in his writing.

Emerson generates new work by returning to index and re-index his journals and earlier essays and lectures so that variations on the same key words and formulations
endlessly circulate and accrete fresh significance. With each revitalizing reiteration and revision the transitive threads between his “specimens” stretch forward and loop back on themselves, creating unanticipated juxtapositions at every turn. For example, the journalized impressions Emerson recorded from the museum are reassembled into a lyceum lecture that he delivered upon his return to Boston in November 1833, which in turn provided the germ for his first published book, *Nature* (1836), as well as multiple essays and lectures to follow. Rather than establishing an authoritative text, Emerson’s challenge is continually to recharge the impressions that first incited expression. His commitment to continuous renewal manifests a compositional method that paradoxically requires a recursive return—a rereading and reinvigoration of earlier writing—in order to inhabit the present moment of composition. As we will see, both Baudelaire’s *correspondances* and Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* pivot on this temporal hinge—a turning back to face forward that I identify as the temporality of surprise.

The writer’s role, Emerson determined at the museum, is to transpose visceral impressions into dynamic forms of expression. As his journal response to the cabinets of natural history reveals, an animating force of feeling moves palpable perceptions into modes of expression that break language out of its fossil form:

we are impressed with the inexhaustible riches of nature. The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms,—the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aping organized forms. Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer,—an occult relation
between the very scorpions and man. I feel the centipede in me,—cayman, carp, eagle, and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies; I say continually “I will be a naturalist.” (Emerson in His Journals 111)

Nature impresses itself on “man the observer” with overwhelming immediacy and variety. But instead of asserting cognitive distance between himself and his objects of observation, he is sympathetically moved into a deeper form of reception. When the eye is instructed by spontaneous feeling the poet-naturalist comes into inter-animating relation with his specimens: the centipede lives in him and he lives in it.

Emerson resists systematizing his labyrinthine tangle of impressions into a static order: the “bewildering series” is recorded in disorienting paratactic listings that accumulate without resolving into any organizational hierarchy. The distinctive punctuation [“,—”] that links the clauses suggests connections without imposing a defining connective logic. Even as Emerson is inspired by the comprehensiveness of the taxonomic design, he insists on its provisionality. “We have no Theory of animated Nature,” he maintains, because claims to completion and finality will only deaden the animated forms. The classificatory principles so gloriously on display at the museum “are introductory and very convenient, but must be looked on as temporary” (Journals III 293). For Emerson, the systemizing impulse is always countered by phenomena that overwhelm totalizing schemas: “Nature…resents generalizing, and insults the philosopher in every moment with a million of fresh particulars” (EL 581). Faced with this perpetual supply of uncategorizable phenomena, the naturalist-poet is spurred to abandon or revise old theories and propose “new generalizations which open into others and larger, which supersede them” (Later Lectures II 158). It is this endless oscillation
between the particular and the general that makes “the life of a man…a self-evolving circle” of discovery (EL 404). Emerson thus portrays a writer who readily anticipates the experience of having his worldview renovated or entirely reversed by a surprising new element of experience.

To elaborate the above journal entry into a lecture Emerson must translate his impressions into a mode of public address that brings the museum to life for his listeners. “The Uses of Natural History,” delivered a month after his return to America, reflects on the intimate relationship between nature and language that makes such a translation possible. When he walks his audience through the museum’s various cabinets his aim is to channel “the power of expression that belongs to external nature” (Early Lectures 24). His observant “eye” casts over “more surprising objects than were known to exist” (Early Lectures 10-11). The surprises he in turn wants to recreate for his audience stem from the “correspondence of the outward world to the inward world of thought and emotions” (Early Lectures 24). This “radical correspondence” is felt, but can also be read (EL 22). Emerson describes “Nature’s proof impressions” as a “grammar of botany,” a “natural alphabet,” a “green and yellow and crimson dictionary” (Early Lectures 7-8). If “every form is a history of the thing,” then when the naturalist regards “the different shades and superimposition of the strata” in the rough ledges of a broken mountainside “his eye is reading as in a book the history of the globe” (Early Lectures 17, 18). To declare “I will be a naturalist” is to commit to learning the “alphabet,” “grammar,” and “dictionary” of Nature. Emerson closes the lecture by confirming this commitment:

Nature is a language and every new fact one learns is a new word; but it is not a language taken to pieces and dead in the dictionary, but the language put together
in a most significant and universal sense. I wish to learn this language—not that I may know a new grammar, but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue. (Early Lectures 26)

Learning to read the material world is one’s primary means of grafting language with a natural origin. If, as Emerson asserts, words are “signs of natural facts,” then the writer’s linguistic materials are necessarily “borrowed from sensible things” (EL 20).

Reanimation occurs in the startling moment that a word that has been withered by rote usage finds its root in the palpable world. But the intrinsic connection between word and thing is deeply buried. For that reason the writer-turned-naturalist must double as an archaeologist: “Language is fossil poetry,” which the poet works to excavate and revive (EL 457).

Reading and writing under the sign of nature requires a fluency in the “surprising objects” that punctuate its patterns. The poet and naturalist’s search for generalized categories goes hand-in-hand with the search for anomalies—new perceptions that do not conform with our expectations and force us to revise the old systems which had structured our understanding of the world. To conclude, I will contend that the movement spurred by surprise from outdated belief to fresh formulation not only organizes Emerson’s major essays but also runs through an American psychological and philosophical tradition centered on questions of pedagogy. But before turning to the philosophical and pedagogical legacy of surprise in America, I first examine its aesthetic

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7 Emerson writes, “The eye is satisfied with seeing and strange thoughts are stirred as you see more surprising objects than were known to exist; transparent lumps of amber with gnats and flies within; radiant spars and marbles; huge blocks of quartz; native gold in all its forms of crystallization and combination…You are impressed with the inexhaustible riches of nature. The limits of the possible are enlarged, and the real is stranger than the imaginary” (Early Lectures 4-5).
legacy in Europe. Emerson’s experiences in Paris indelibly impressed themselves on his compositional practice and worldview. His primary discovery at the museum—that the only universal law is “perpetual surprise”—also animates the modernism of two of his readers in Paris, Baudelaire and Proust (Emerson qtd. in Brown 216).

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“Optimism versus disenchantment, moralism versus art for art’s sake, transcendentalism versus impressionism”: if one takes these entrenched binaries as a starting point the divide between Emerson and apparently disenchanted modernist aesthetes (like Baudelaire and Proust) appears unbridgeable (Virtanen 123). It may seem improbable that the new method of composition heralded by Emerson’s declaration—“I will be a naturalist!”—would so closely resemble one laid out in Baudelaire’s foundational essays on the urban artist. And yet, ten years after he read the first series of essays, Baudelaire displayed a “surprising reawakening of interest in Emerson” (Gilman 214). His newly intensified engagement is first recorded in the journals Baudelaire began to keep in 1857, shortly after Emerson’s second series of essays were translated. Whereas Emerson’s journals were a lifelong project, Baudelaire’s idiosyncratic assemblage marked a transitional moment in his life and career. Though they differ in scope and tone, both journals represent their authors’ efforts to respond as directly and immediately as possible to their day-to-day experiences. Like Emerson, Baudelaire gathered (in his translator Christopher Isherwood’s words) “an assortment of wonderful fragments, cryptic memoranda, literary notes, quotations, rough drafts of prose poems, explosions of political anger and personal spleen” (“Translator’s Preface,” Intimate Journals 10). For Emerson, this repository of impressions became the source of all his writings; for Baudelaire, it was the site of ferment for his most influential essays on modern aesthetics.
Critics have generally read the material posthumously collected in a volume titled *Intimate Journals* [*Journaux intimes*] as Baudelaire’s response to personal breakdown.\(^8\) The journals are scattered with Emersonsian aphorisms on autonomy, genius, and heroism, mostly paraphrased from *The Conduct of Life*. In these citations, Baudelaire formulates a dogmatic version of self-reliance that is pitched towards consolidating “a well thought-out individualism [*l’individualisme bien entendu*]” (Baudelaire qtd. in Howells, *Baudelaire* 28). To this end, the shifty variability of Emerson’s locutions are recast as instrumental moral maxims that promote productive work habits he felt himself to be lacking. For example, Baudelaire echoes the strident assertions of Emerson’s “Power” on the importance of focused attention and disciplined will in a section of the notebooks headed “Hygiene. Morality. Conduct [*Hygiène. Conduite. Méthode*]” (*Intimate Journals* 109). Elsewhere he directly quotes him: “The one prudence in life is concentration; the one evil is dissipation” (Baudelaire qtd. in Howells, *Baudelaire* 98).

While Baudelaire initially works against the dispersal of attention and subjectivity, he goes on to amend his interpretation of the sentiment. In another section of the notebooks, Baudelaire conjoins those dynamics he had earlier opposed: “Of the vaporization and centralization of the *Ego*. Everything depends on that [*De la vaporisation et de la centralisation du Moi. Tout est là*]” (*Intimate Journals* 63). Any centrality or solidity of “*le Moi*” is recognized as a temporary state that might be dissolved and decentered at a moment’s notice. Alternately vaporous and concentrated, Baudelaire’s self-conception

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\(^8\) Baudelaire’s *Intimate Journals* combine two sets of notes entitled “Squibs [*Fusées*]” and “My Heart Laid Bare [*Mon coeur mis à nu*].” There is evidence that Baudelaire had intended to combine these pages into what he described as “a big book of myself, my Confession [*un grand livre sur moi-même, mes Confessions*]” (*Baudelaire, Œuvres Complètes* 227, my translation).
resembles the Emersonian self of “Illusions” for whom “dissipation” is not “evil” but simply a condition of living. Emerson’s essay opens with an epigraphic poem that reframes “power” as the enduring capacity to ride out “the wild dissipation” of existence:

To change and to flow,
The gas become solid,
And phantoms and nothings
Return to be things,
And endless imbroglio
Is the law and the world,—
Then first shalt thou know,
That in the wild turmoil,
Horsed on the Proteus,
Thou ridest to power
And to endurance. (EL 1113-14)

When the law of the world is continual change and flow between material and psychic states, the protean self must weather “endless imbroglio.” As becomes apparent over the course of the essay, “incessant flowing” is the only constant. For Emerson as for Baudelaire, “Life is an ecstasy” where the “everlasting” and “fugitive” converge (EL 1113). In “The Method of Nature” Emerson spatializes this doubled temporality: the “work of ecstasy [is] to be represented by a circular movement, as intention might be signified by a straight line of definite length” (EL 120). Baudelaire follows Emerson in countering “straight” time with spiraling correspondences that connect a fleeting experience of the “now” with an enduring law of contingency. The myth of the heroic
individual and the original genius have a clear appeal for Baudelaire, but his journals’ fragmentary form ultimately performs a self in process. As Jean-Paul Sartre has argued, the unresolved tension between the impulses to organize and disperse the self is the principal drama of Baudelaire’s work.

While Baudelaire voices intense longings for coherence and stability, an ongoing struggle towards self-forgetting is equally central to his writing. Sartre’s seminal study of Baudelaire portrays a writer so entrenched in his own consciousness that he yearns to escape self-scrutiny: “Baudelaire was the man who never forgot himself. He watched himself see; he watched in order to see himself watch” (22). This introspective loop of “auto-idolâtrie” at once denies and fixes the self (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* 402).

Sartre views Baudelaire’s work as a series of attempts to “take himself by surprise”: “He simulated a disconcerting spontaneity, pretended to surrender to the most gratuitous impulses so that he could suddenly appear in his own eyes as an opaque, unpredictable object, appear in fact as though he were *Another Person*...” (27). But Sartre concludes that Baudelaire’s efforts to surprise himself were doomed to fail because “abandonment was as unknown to him as spontaneity” (135). In *simulating* the spontaneous and *pretending* to surrender to the impulsive and unexpected, he always “foresaw and measured his own astonishment” and found himself “identical with the person he wished to surprise” (27). In other words, when Baudelaire contrived “his own plan” to encounter the unexpected, he remained tethered to predictability (27). But in his famous essays on modern aesthetics, written contemporaneously with the material collected in his *Intimate Journals*, Baudelaire developed an aesthetic approach to surprising himself out of his propriety, which owes a debt to Emerson.
Baudelaire announces Emerson’s significance to modern aesthetics in “The Work and Life of Eugène Delacroix [L’oeuvre et la vie d’Eugène Delacroix].” He holds up the writer and artist as a model of the kind of radical openness coupled with exacting structure to which he aspired in his own life and writing. In this essay, Baudelaire aims to free Emerson from his “reputation as the leader of that wearisome Bostonian school” by conferring on him the status of a modern “stoic” who “effectively stimulates meditation” on contemporary life (“Delacroix” 53). He dismisses the popular understanding of Emerson as a transcendental “moralist” with his depiction of a “transatlantic” figure of modernity whose influence stretches beyond the confines of nineteenth-century New England into the urban center of Paris (“Delacroix” 53).

Beyond Baudelaire’s claims for Emerson’s cosmopolitan modernity, the essay advocates an artistic method that bears a remarkable resemblance to the one that Emerson first articulated in response to Paris’s cabinets of natural history. For Baudelaire as for Emerson, “The whole universe is but a store-house of images and signs,” and “Nature is but a dictionary” (“Delacroix” 47). The naturalist-poet and the modern artist are similarly tasked with internalizing, deciphering, and transposing these natural signs. For Baudelaire, Delacroix exemplifies an aesthetic sensibility that brings formal structure to immediate sensation; he is “open to every sort of idea and impression,” but “armed in advance with the most rapid means of translation” (“Delacroix” 46). The “genius,” as Baudelaire and Emerson agree, pairs a fresh, childlike “perceptiveness” with “strong nerves” capable of bringing “classified, ordered, harmonized” form to a chaotic store of impressions (“Painter” 402). Passionate “temperaments” and “tyrannical whims” must be matched with a “passion for method” and “firm maxims” (“Delacroix” 47). The
challenge is to “digest and transform” the “heap of raw materials” without deadening them into “inanimate nature” (“Delacroix” 49). The primary pitfalls that for Baudelaire deaden creativity—“copying and forget[ting] feeling”—follow likewise from Emerson (“Delacroix” 47).

For Baudelaire as for Emerson, reading literature is central to the compositional process. Delacroix, Baudelaire establishes, is as great a reader of the poets as he is of nature’s dictionary. In fact, he suggests that the rapidly responsive movements of the artist’s brush are inspired by gestural sentences like those crafted by Emerson: the writer’s “unadorned prose seems to imitate the swift movements of thought,” which in turn leaves the artist “full of sublime, swiftly-defined images” (“Delacroix” 53, 46). The conversion of another’s words into an inventive impetus is Emerson’s definition of “creative reading” (EL 59). His guiding mantra—“First we read, then we write”—envisions sentences that spark something intrinsic to the reader’s own creative impulse (Emerson in His Journals 298). Importantly, this is a process of discovery, not a confirmation of preexisting ideas. Emerson maintains that “the best part of each writer” is that “which he does not know” (EL 293). His proposition gestures towards the strange form of subjectivity that emerges at the moment reading quickens into writing. In suspending “le moi” in “le non-moi” Baudelaire too learns to encounter himself and his writing with a feeling of surprise.

As Baudelaire’s guide from his journals to his critical essays on modern aesthetics, Emerson clears space for the poet to navigate a new relationship with his “hypocrite lecteur.” The prospect of having his words misunderstood or twisted into something unintended is a source of well-documented anxiety for Baudelaire. By
contrast, Emerson embraces the fact that the meaning and interpretation of words can’t be fixed; their convertibility is what makes creative reading and writing possible. Bernard Howells has argued that the reader’s power to alienate Baudelaire’s work from its original intentions “contaminated the writer’s spontaneity” and frustrated his desire for self-possession (“Vaporisation” 432). But at a time when his journals and essays are most strongly marked by Emerson, Baudelaire begins to negotiate alternatives to his paralyzing need for full self-possession and interpretive control.

Baudelaire’s journals assert a “universal misunderstanding” between reader and writer: “The unbridgeable gulf [le gouffre infrachissable]—the cause of their failure in communication remains—unbridged [reste infranchi]” (Intimate Journals 90). But in “The Painter of Modern Life [Le peintre de la vie moderne]” an essay of the same period, he develops two key figures who represent alternate responses to this insurmountable divide: the dandy and the painter of modern life. Critics sometimes conflate these personages, but in fact Baudelaire’s exemplary modern artist “parts company trenchantly from dandyism [se détache violemment du dandysme]” (“Painter” 399). “Painter” crystallizes the crucial difference between their respective attitudes towards surprise. The dandy maintains his “cult of the ego” by “causing surprise in others and…never showing any oneself” (“Painter” 420). In this sense, he resembles the military man: “Accustomed as he is to surprises, the soldier does not easily lose his composure” (“Painter” 417). It is not that these figures don’t feel surprise, but that they immediately counter unsettlement with redoubled efforts towards composed subjectivity. While “the dandy is blasé,” aspiring to “cold detachment” and “self-containment,” the painter of modern life “hates
blasé people” (“Painter” 399). With an “insatiable passion” for “seeing and feeling” the artist allows sensory waves to “flood chaotically into him” (“Painter” 399, 401). He is a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting. (“Painter” 400)

Though the artist’s ego is thirsty for non-ego, “le moi” does not effortlessly dissolve into “le non-moi.” At times, the stream of experience moves with a “flowing grace.” In those moments, “The crowd is his domain” just as “the water [is] that of the fish” (“Painter” 399). “It becomes an immense source of enjoyment [jouissance] to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow [dans l’ondoyant, dans le mouvement] of the fleeting and the infinite” (“Painter” 399). But at other moments the swamped self thrashes against its dissolution.

Leo Bersani describes “the Baudelairean discovery of psychic mobility, of unanchored identity” this way: “Baudelaire’s work gives us images of this psychic fragmentation at the same time that it documents the resistance to all such ontological floating” (Baudelaire 2, 4). Here we might recall how Emerson likewise invokes images of unanchored drift to document his struggle with life’s exposure to uncertainty. Both writers respond to the unmoored condition of living by reorienting their aesthetic projects around surprise. When he admits an ever-present gap between himself and his audience, Baudelaire can redirect his energies. He thus sets out to present his reader with the unforeseen accidents of experience. In Paris Spleen [Le Spleen de Paris] Baudelaire
affirms that “next to feeling surprise oneself, there is no greater pleasure than giving someone else a surprise” (58). With surprise rather than any prescribed response as the goal, writer and reader are freed so that reading and writing become shared endeavors—even if all that is shared is misunderstanding.

Though the contemporary artists Baudelaire focuses on are “men of the crowd,” their modernity is not defined by urban anomie and mass society. Unlike the Benjaminian flâneur who appears at a singular point of breakage in the nineteenth century, Baudelaire’s artist emerges in response to transitional periods in every era. His modern moment is constituted by an “essential quality of being in the present” (“Painter” 391). To fully inhabit the modernity of the present is to experience a profound “correspondence” between “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” and “the eternal” (“Painter” 403). The evanescent circumstances of the “now” can only be understood as particularly “modern” in contextual relation to an enduring quality of time that spans history. This means “there was a form of modernity for every painter of the past” (“Painter” 403). The distinctive temporality of correspondances characterizes the immersive experience of the crowd, but as we will see, it also distinguishes Emerson’s solitary experience of “crossing a bare common…under a clouded sky,” and Marcel’s experience of tripping over a paving stone while crossing the Guermantes’ courtyard (EL 10). The Baudelairean artist’s desire “to see the world, to be at the very center of the world yet to be the unseen of the world” is precisely the achievement of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” (“Painter” 400, EL 10). It is also the achievement of Proust’s narrator-turned-writer and the defining achievement of the Recherche.
For Proust, Baudelaire’s conception of correspondances is concomitant with “modern beauty,” which the poet insists is “always surprising” (Illuminations 197, “Salon de 1859” 241). Baudelaire elaborates his conception of beauty as the unexpected convergence of two apparently disparate elements. For example, he admires painterly strokes that take on a sculptural or plastic quality and lines of poetic language that seamlessly fuse abstraction with the palpably concrete. Baudelaire’s central paradigm of the beautiful is the heterogeneous temporality of the correspondance, which merges the “eternal and invariable” (an enduring quality unaltered by shifts in fashion and taste) with a “circumstantial element” (contingent on the particulars of time and place) (“Painter” 392). In bringing together these divergent facets of time, media, and experience, “Beauty is always surprising [Le Beau est toujours étonnant].” As Baudelaire maintains throughout his later writings on aesthetics, “artists seeking to surprise the public [qui cherchent à étonner le public]” and themselves take on a project without guarantees (“Salon de 1859” 241, my translation). While there can be no promise of fulfillment, the pursuit of the unsettling and unexpected maintains the vitality of art, propelling it into an unknown future.

It is this forward-looking dimension of Baudelairean correspondances, and in turn, Proust’s mémoire involontaire, that Benjamin and critics to follow have failed to account for. As I noted in my Introduction, Benjamin holds up Proust’s reflections on Baudelaire as evidence of the deterioration of experience. He points to the writer’s increasing dependence on chance encounters as an index of diminished access to the “data of prehistory” (Illuminations 158, 182). Benjamin quotes the following passage from Proust’s Finding Time Again to make his case:
In Baudelaire…these reminiscences are even more numerous. It is apparent that they are not occasioned by chance, and this, to my mind, is what gives them crucial importance. There is no one else who pursues the interconnected correspondances with such leisurely care, fastidiously and yet nonchalantly—in a woman’s scent for instance, in the fragrance of her hair or her breasts—correspondances which then inspire him with lines like ‘the azure of the vast, vaulted sky, or ‘a harbor full of flames and masts.’ (Proust qtd. in Illuminations 183)

In Benjamin’s interpretation, Proust looks back on Baudelaire with nostalgic longing for a time when the writer could voluntarily “take hold of his experience” in all its authentic fullness (Illuminations 158). Having rooted the beauty of correspondances in the “realm of ritual,” where it is imbued with “the data of remembrance” and traditions of the past, Benjamin misses an equally vital facet of Baudelaire’s emblem of aesthetic modernity: its future-oriented capacity to surprise the writer and his audience (Illuminations 182). In the final volume of the Recherche, Proust’s contemplation of Baudelairean correspondances brings this prospective dimension of mémoire involontaire to the fore.

The passage that for Benjamin signals an irreparable break with the aesthetic and experiential richness of the past, in fact introduces the narrator’s extended meditation on the unbounded (yet equally uncertain) potential of a future devoted to writing. Marcel’s reflections on Baudelaire’s correspondances affirm his dedication to a literary “vocation”

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9 Here is the passage Benjamin is quoting: “Chez Baudelaire, enfin, ces réminiscences plus nombreuses encore, sont évidemment moins fortuites et par conséquent, à mon avis, plus décisives. C’est le poète lui-même, avec plus de choix et de paresse, recherche volontairement, dans l’odeur d’une femme par exemple, de sa chevelure et de son sein, les analogies inspiratrices qui lui évoqueront « l’azur du ciel immense et rond » et « un port rempli de flammes et de mats »” (Temps retrouvé 73).
that will similarly transpose sensations—beginning with “the taste of the madeleine”—into “aesthetic impressions” (*Finding Time* 228). Far from dispiriting him, Baudelaire’s example motivates the narrator to “establish a place for [him]self in such a noble tradition” and assures him that “the work which [he] no longer had the slightest hesitation in undertaking was worth the effort [he] was going to devote to it” (*Finding Time* 229).

In this context, the gap between the narrator’s accidental “reminiscences” and Baudelaire’s deliberate pursuit of *correspondances* is one that he hopes to narrow by applying himself with the same “leisurely care” to his newly declared occupation. Contingency is as integral to *correspondances* as it is to *mémoire involontaire*; Baudelaire can no more predict what wafting aroma might inspire his connection with the arc of azure sky than Proust can foretell what taste will bring forth the full sweep of the way by Swann’s. Though the particulars of the encounter itself will remain undetermined, the receptive state that precedes it and the expressive impetus that follows can be cultivated to give occasion to such an event. Like Baudelaire, the narrator fosters a mode of readiness and responsiveness that combines looseness with precision. By definition, the involuntary impression cannot be controlled by acts of will. However, Marcel’s reflections on Baudelaire come at a pivotal point in the final movement of the *Recherche* when he realizes that he can in fact create hospitable conditions for the unexpected; his state of reflective attention need not be left entirely up to chance. The narrator prepares himself to be a writer by preparing himself to be surprised.

In “Contre Saint-Beuve,” Proust encapsulates the temporal schema that will come to be called *mémoire involontaire*. He opens by correcting a critical misconception tipped
by the misleading word “memory.” As Proust insists, what is “restore[d] to us under the name of the past is not the past”:

In reality, as soon as each hour of one’s life has died, it embodies itself in some material object, as do the souls of the dead…There it remains captive, captive forever unless we happen on the object, and recognize what lies within, call it by its name, and so set it free. (“Contre Saint-Beuve” 19)

Robert Richardson identifies this passage as a rearticulation of Emerson’s view of “the relationship between mind and world,” only stripped of its spirituality (First We Read 32). However, to read these lines simply as a secularization of Emerson’s claim that “the Universe is the externisation of the soul” is to miss the Neoplatonism intrinsic to Proust’s conception of the involuntary (EL 453). Proust echoes Emerson, but also Plotinus, when he envisions each hour of lived experience lodged in the world of objects, to be awakened and unleashed by a recognizant gaze. For Plotinus, to “recognize what lies within” requires a transformation of physical perception and inner vision with the goal of “surpassing the limits of individuality” (Hadot 30, 13).10 Turning inward and outward at once, “we become the object” and “potentially ourselves” (Plotinus qtd. by Hadot 32).11

Emerson, and in turn Proust, transposes Plotinus’s chiasmatic structure of perception into a writing practice guided by an aesthetic principle of surprise. “A new interest surprises us, whilst…we contemplate the fearful extent and multitude of objects,” writes Emerson in Nature. We are surprised, in other words, by a material world of

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10 As will be apparent, Pierre Hadot has strongly shaped my reading of Plotinus.
11 I’ve drawn from Hadot’s translation of a passage that can be found in the A.H. Armstrong’s translation of Ennead IV: “one’s activity…is directed towards the object of contemplation, and one becomes this, offering oneself to it as a kind of matter, being formed according to what one sees, and being oneself then only potentially” (4.2 p.141).
objects that manifests an agency external to the perceiver’s will. But, he continues, “every object rightly seen, unlocks a new faculty of the soul” (EL 25). Surprise is also the mark of an inner world of experience that can be accessed when the angle of vision aligns with what Proust refers to as our source of “celestial nourishment [céleste nourriture]”—or what both writers call a “soul” in these examples (Time Regained 264). In Plotinus, Emerson and Proust find a painstaking method of preparing the perceptual apparatus so that when the object is encountered it can be “rightly seen.”

The two writers’ inheritance of a Plotinian pedagogy of perception—along with the fact that Proust read Emerson—has been obscured by the long shadow of Platonic idealism. Those few scholars who have elaborated Proust’s reading of Emerson align the writers’ Platonism with bounded forms of individualism. According to this critical account, the two writers share a common desire to reveal “a real world” concealed behind “the world of appearances” (Carter 48). But their shared longing to reunite spiritual and material registers of reality is seen to manifest in two dispositionally different orientations towards time. As one critic sums up, “Emerson’s Platonism was optimistic and could look forward. That of Proust was precisely the ‘mystique of looking backward’” (Virtanen 133). This formulation categorically divides the realms of internal invisibility and external visibility. The writers are seen to respond to the dividedness of experience and the impossibility of full presence by looking in opposite directions: Emerson’s romanticist naïveté projects an idealistic future, while the disenchanted gaze of Proust’s modernism stretches back to a nostalgic past.

12 Though I have used Ian Patterson’s translation of Le temps retrouvé [Finding Time Again] throughout this chapter, here I quote C.K. Scott Moncrieff’s more direct translation of “céleste nourriture” (rather than Patterson’s “heavenly food”) (Finding Time 181, Temps retrouvé 15).
When Plato is taken as the starting point for establishing Proust and Emerson’s relation, they can only share an idealist opposition of inner and outer, which reinforces an equally oppositional model of modernism’s break with everything that came before. A very different order of time and perception presents itself if we take their common reading of Plotinus as an alternate point of departure. The Neoplatonic vision of the universe that Plotinus offers is characterized by a non-dualist plentitude that imbricates inner life and its ambient surroundings. Whereas Plato seeks spiritual oneness beyond this world, Plotinus seeks immersive presence within it. For Plotinus, a conversion of attention comes not in an epiphanic moment of transcendence, but rather through a demanding regime of perceptual training to be practiced over the course of life. Far from escaping a lived experience, Plotinus’s spiritual exercises are a means of making material existence more viscerally immediate.

The final volume of the *Rercherche* follows a Plotinian pattern of “contemplative ascent” (to borrow Martha Nussbaum’s term), but the set-piece party scene of *Finding Time Again* showcases the distinctly Emersonian inflection that Proust brings to his Neoplatonism (*Upheavals* 482). Each act of perception in this episode vividly confirms Plotinus’s contention that the physical world is entwined with an enchanted invisible world. This ineffable realm of experience can be awakened by a properly calibrated...

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13 My reading of Proust in the terms of Neoplatonism takes an important cue from Eve Sedgwick’s observation that “the Neoplatonic tradition remained for Proust the profoundest reservoir for such ideas and images, as it also was for such of his favorite authors as Emerson” (*Weather* 6). Here she is discussing the figure of the Hubert Robert fountain, which exemplifies Proust’s interest in the interpenetration of open and closed systems like the weather. Sedgwick goes onto discuss the tutelary spirits or *daimon* that populate an ontologically intermediate realm between the sensible and spiritual world in the *Recherche*. The “queer little gods,” as she calls them, enliven the possibility of transindividuality in the *Recherche*—the merging and migration of souls.
faculty of attention. But “for the soul to be affected,” Plotinus explains, there has to be something that mediates between “the external object and the soul” (Ennead IV 4.23 p.199). The nebulous intermediary form that Plotinus calls “affection” is defined in open-ended terms as a means of “somehow linking the extremes to each other, with the capacity of receiving and of transmitting information” (Ennead IV 4.23 p.199-200). From the moment that the narrator trips over an uneven paving stone in the Princesse de Guermantes’s courtyard, those mediating affections are cast in the amorphous mold of surprise. Marcel experiences the successive involuntary encounters that follow as startling expansions of perceptual consciousness that bring to light the invisible potential stored in people and things. In this initial instance, it is the narrator’s own obscured potential that suddenly comes into view. As he stumbles he dislodges the apprehensions impeding the “‘famous’ work” which he had “so long hoped each day to begin the next” (Finding Time 162,164):

Just as at the moment when I tasted the madeleine, all the uneasiness about the future and all the intellectual doubt were gone. Those that had assailed me a moment earlier about the reality of my intellectual talent, even the reality of literature, were lifted as if by enchantment. (Finding Time 175)

What differentiates the paving stone from the madeleine is the investigative purpose that the narrator brings to the moment. On this occasion he refuses to “resign [him]self to not knowing the reason” why his vision of the future (and his place in it) has undergone such a dramatic change (Finding Time 179). Thus begins Marcel’s exhaustive rumination on

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14 In Ennead IV, Plotinus sets out his model of perception this way: “We must suppose that the perception of sense-objects is for the soul or the living being an act of apprehension, in which the soul understands the quality attaching to bodies and takes the impression of their forms” (Ennead IV 4.23 p. 197).
the cause of these involuntary impressions and the nature of their relationship to time—
his version of a “contemplative ascent.”

Awaiting the party in the Guermantes library, the narrator is consumed by the
question of how an involuntary experience that exceeds willful control might properly be
prepared for. In other words he asks how he can practice being ready for surprises. The
dialogue Marcel carries out with himself echoes Plotinus’s self-examination two
millennia before. Plotinus poses the question in terms of perceptual power and its
activation: “Why then, when we have such great possession, do we not consciously grasp
them, but are most inactive in these ways, and some of us are never active at all?”
*(Ennead V 1.12 p. 51).*\(^{15}\) Awakening the “faculty of vision” that “everyone possesses, but
few people ever use” is a matter of spontaneous discovery and rigorous training. The
Plotinian epiphany, in Hadot’s words, is that “everything is within us, and we are within
all things” (27). But a single revelatory moment is not enough. For true transformation,
the perceptual apparatus must be disciplined to communicate with an invisible realm of
experience—a realm that is nevertheless embedded in the terrestrial world where it can
be accessed by corporeal beings.\(^ {16}\) As Sedgwick has shown in *The Weather in Proust*, a
potent source of such teaching in the *Recherche* is the novel’s Neoplatonic pantheon of
tutelary spirits and guiding *genii*. In this decisive scene, however, the narrator finds that
his own introspective attention can offer him equally powerful guidance.

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\(^{15}\) He responds to his own query this way: “when a particular active power does not give
a share in its activity to the perceiving power, that activity has not yet pervaded the whole
soul” (*Ennead V* 1.12 p. 51).

\(^{16}\) Hadot writes, “the spiritual world was not, for him, a supraterrestrial or supracosmic
space, from which he was separated from the vastnesses of celestial space. Neither was it
an original state, irretrievably lost…Rather, this spiritual world was nothing other than
the self at its deepest level. It could be reached immediately, by returning within oneself”
(25).
Marcel’s deliberate turn of contemplative attention makes way for two more experiences of mémoire involontaire triggered in rapid succession by the sound of a spoon against a plate and the touch of a napkin against his mouth: “the signs which were, on this day, to bring me out of my despondency and renew my faith in literature were intent on multiplying themselves” (Finding Time 176). This locution affords agency to the objects, but Marcel also realizes his signal role in multiplying moments such as those occasioned by the madeleine, the pavestone, the spoon, and the napkin. He is able to quickly triple his encounters with “the essence of things” by attuning himself to those facets of experience that might otherwise pass unnoticed (Finding Time 181). In each case, a fleeting but palpable sensation opens the way for a startling recognition of “something shared between a day in the past and the present moment” (Finding Time 179). Though the narrator feels an overwhelming flood of joy in the moment of recognition, it is not the pleasure of finding something that was lost. Instead, he is ecstatically liberated from paralyzing anxieties around “the vicissitudes of the future” (Finding Time 179). Freed from fear, the narrator can for the first time take uncertain yet decisive steps towards his chosen vocation. The liberating power of this involuntary series of events stems from Marcel’s understanding that preparing to be struck by attuned observation is in fact the embodiment of this vocation. The feeling of attention blooming into new words—of attention felt as writing even before it has been physically inscribed—instantiates the narrator’s sense of inevitable correlation between preparatory perception and the act of writing itself.

The narrator’s new paradigm of perception thus fuses preparation with spontaneity, decisiveness with indeterminacy. He assumes a posture of ready reception
that floats the past and the future in a buoyant present. Although this attention to the here-and-now increases his contact with the involuntary, Marcel also recognizes the futility of stabilizing these “fugitive” impressions of “eternity”: “The only way to continue to appreciate them was to try to understand them more completely just as they were…within myself” (*Finding Time* 181, 185). As he goes on to explain, “every impression comes in two parts, half of it contained within the object and the other half…extending into us” (*Finding Time* 200). Hadot elaborates a similarly chiasmatic relationship between inner and outer which subtends Plotinian vision: “The metamorphosis of inner vision…has as its counterpart the metamorphosis of physical vision…although the spiritual world is within us, it is also outside us” (35). Marcel succeeds in metamorphizing his internal and external faculties of vision by pairing an openness to the outer world with introspective attention to the fluctuating sensations within. Practicing this non-oppositional form of perception, the Proustian self begins to have the “impression that it is losing itself” (to draw once more on a Plotinian formulation) (Hadot 32).

In *Finding Time Again*, time is regained through the process of forgetting the self and shedding its prior paradigms of perception. As the narrator finds when he leaves the Guermantes library for the drawing room, a solitary process of self-forgetting requires a different practice of attention than losing oneself in the company of others. Marcel’s decision to accept the Princesse de Guermantes’s invitation marks his “return to society” after a long retreat from Paris (*Finding Time* 227). Upon arrival at the party, he is initially convinced that his friends have all donned powdered wigs, make-up, and costumes to masquerade as elderly versions of themselves. When he finally grasps that they have grown old, as indeed has he, the narrator’s sense of time comes entirely unhinged.
However, even in this vulnerably disoriented state, Marcel’s confrontation with the startling realities of “old age” neither spurs his defensive retreat from the defamiliarized scene, nor triggers his nostalgic longing for an irrecoverable past (*Finding Time* 240). Instead, recollection reorients him toward an expansive horizon of open-ended possibility: “time had not only brought about the ruin of the creatures of a former epoch, it had made possible, had indeed created, new associations” (*Finding Time* 257).

The narrator’s realization that “we are living in a new world” does not come all at once, but in a series of renewing recognitions facilitated by an ongoing process of disorientation and reorientation. Marcel’s experience and expression of surprise at each unforeseen encounter braids retrospection with prospection, familiarity with unfamiliarity. Significantly, he compares the “revelation of Time” in the wizened faces and figures of his friends to the “magic lantern show” that transformed his “bedroom doorknob in Combray” (*Finding Time* 233). But far from mourning the “lost time” of childhood, this return to the paradigmatic bedroom facilitates his “astonished [on s’étonnait…]” appreciation of how each “one could read the tally of years” in the face and figures of old friends and foes. Scanning the faces of the party guests, he detects a “shifting atmosphere” that has generously recast each figure with the passage of time (*Finding Time* 233):

In the case of a woman whom one had known as narrow-minded and unsympathetic, an unrecognizable relaxation of the cheeks, an unpredictable curving of the nose, caused the same surprise, often the same pleasant surprise [*la même surprise, la même bonne surprise*], as some sensitive and profound remark
or some noble and courageous deed that one would never have expected of her.

*(Finding Time 234)*

Each fresh meeting with an old friend offers the narrator “something much more valuable than an image of the past” *(Finding Time 234)*. The realization of “all the time that had passed” revitalizes his relationship to the present and serves as the “point of departure for a new life.” As Marcel comes to appreciate, “having lived one day to the next since [his] childhood” he has accumulated the “raw material” for his prospective book: “now I understood the meaning of death, loves, the pleasures of the mind, the use of suffering” *(Finding Time 240)*.

In each encounter at the Guermantes party, recognition comes in the moment that the narrator lets go of the obsolete image he had fixed of each of the guests. Freed from that entrenched framework, Marcel discovers, in Emerson’s words, “a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great” *(EL 483)*. He meets the old friends, acquaintances, and nemeses as if for the first time, maintaining a sense of their history that doesn’t engulf the present. It is only by forgetting his certainties about this social world and its participants that the narrator can imagine his own future untethered from the past. In this sense, Proustian memory becomes as much a matter of forgetting as of remembrance. This episode unfolds as a confirmation of Emerson’s contention that “noble creative forces” are unleashed when “we have successive experiences so important that the new forgets the old” *(EL 954)*. In Emerson’s use of the word, forgetting is not erasure but an awakening of “the present, which is infinite” *(EL 394)*. Understood in this sense, the extraordinary account of self-forgetting at the end of Emerson’s “Circles” captures Marcel’s yearning to grasp the full temporal spectrum of
the involuntary: “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle” (EL 414). The figure that most famously embodies this self-forgetting—the experience of being surprised out of a proper self—is Emerson’s transparent eyeball. As we will see, William James takes this Emersonian figure as a touchstone for a literary pedagogy with surprise at its heart.

While Baudelaire and Proust formalize Emerson’s conception of surprise into modernist signatures of time, experience, and subjectivity, Williams James formalizes it into a principle of education. For James, Emerson provides a counterpoint to the more instrumental directives of psychology. Where the writer outstrips the psychologist is the point at which Emerson renews attention to each transitory moment in order to “feel how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meaning” (WI 861). As William writes to his brother Henry James, Emerson has thrown a paradoxically “practical light” on his path by illuminating the significance of those moments that might otherwise be overlooked because they cannot be put to utilitarian ends (LWJ 122). Rather than requiring a retreat from modern change, the question of how to live so that we are perpetually susceptible to being surprised resolves itself for William “into a practical question of the conduct of life”—a question which vitally informs our actions and experiences on a moment-by-moment basis (EL 943). In response, William transitions from a comprehensive enumeration of psychological principles to a more open-endedly philosophical orientation towards the contingency of experience in what he calls “a pluralistic, restless universe” (WI 589).
In 1892 James condensed and reformulated his *Principles of Psychology* into a “Briefer Course” as well as a series of “Talks to Teachers and to Students” that explain the pedagogical purposes of his psychological paradigms of habit, interest, attention, memory, apperception, and will. A theme that recurs across these talks is the necessity of putting our emotions to practical work for us. Emotion is either our ally or our adversary, depending on whether the habits it quickens are “systematically organized for our weal or work” (*WI* 750). Action-oriented habits developed in the classroom guide emotionally-invested attention towards purposeful exchanges with the social and physical world. Equipped with James’s briefing in psychology, the audience of teachers is charged with implementing “practical solution[s]” to the challenges posed by the wayward movements of consciousness (*WI* 815).

James’s educational methods are an extension of his primary investigative method of introspection.\(^\text{17}\) Before he proposed a set of pedagogical principles based on his psychological research, James recommended that readers of *Principles* train their attention to phenomena internal to their own bodies. As he notes, the subtle “adjustments” and barely discernible fluctuations that comprise emotional life often go unperceived “for want of attention and reflection” (*PP* 301). Introspection, as James understands it, is a way of heightening one’s inborn capacity to yoke “the immediate *felt*ness of a feeling” with a “subsequent reflective act” (*PP* 189). His talks to teachers and students build on the insight that this intuitive capacity to feel one’s feelings and to

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\(^{17}\) James claims the term introspection “need hardly be defined—it means, of course, the looking into our mind and reporting what we there discover” (*PP* 185). He advocates introspective scrutiny of one’s own psychic state to counter what he called the “psychologist’s fallacy,” or the notion that an external observer offers the most empirically sound account of a subject’s state of mind (*PP* 196).
reflect on them can be practiced and developed. But James’s pedagogy, like his psychology, must grapple with two “snares” of introspection that open the potential for investigative error: temporal delay and subjective perception. The “changing character” of thought and feeling means that consciousness exists as a “process in time” rather than as a fixed, identifiable state (WI 431). As a result, introspective observations regarding the nature of consciousness will always be belated, the phenomena having already passed by the time it can be processed or articulated. A further complication James concedes is the fact that we can never separate our observations about consciousness from our processes of consciousness. As a result, introspecting subjects can claim no objective distance from their objects of introspection.

As James discovers, however, sources of introspective fallibility also yield fresh discoveries. The gap between the immediacy of experience and our reflection on it introduces the potential for misinterpretation, but it also allows for a vital variousness of interpretation. Reading Emerson, James learns that the vitality of feelings and perceptions depends on the very changeability of our reflections on them. The interval between an instantaneous experience and belated awareness precludes automatism and makes room for novel unpredictability. The poet-naturalist teaches that those anomalous surprises, phenomena which refuse to adhere to preconception, are the richest source of unanticipated insight. The success of the introspective method therefore depends on the breadth and belatedness of surprise, which encompasses both the unanticipated feeling and the reflective response James aims to activate. For this reason, Emerson’s writings are foundational for a pedagogical program which enlivens students to those events and
feelings that unsettle what they think they know about themselves and the world around them.

In James’s “Talks to Students” lectures, the “practical question of the conduct of life” is reframed as a question of “what makes a life significant” (WI 861). On this question James sees psychology’s methods falling short. Its preoccupation with causality and functionality can come at the expense of an ego-centered “deadness”—a “hard externality” which is largely “impenetrable by others” (WI 847, 862). For James, the practice of literary reading most powerfully counters a “blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves” (WI 841). Reading literature, he affirms, can spur a “recognizant” turn towards otherwise “invisible things”: the alien other, the life of inanimate objects, and the volatile fluctuations of each passing moment (WI 862, 849). James emphasizes to students and teachers alike that judgment, perception, and action “all depend on the feelings things arouse in us” (WI 841). His lectures are motivated by the question of how emotional fluctuations can be shaped into practical habits of expression and action. But as James insists, those practical habits should not be divorced from the “responsive sensibilities” that literary reading is uniquely positioned to cultivate (WI 856). To this end, James quotes passages from Emerson, Walt Whitman, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Leo Tolstoy that teach us how they are to be read: with eyes that see beyond an “external and insensible point of view,” as opposed to with “the eyes of a remote spectator” (WI 862, 865).

Emerson in particular provides a literary compass for James throughout his career. In the lecture “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” James quotes Emerson’s
transparency passage from “Nature” as paradigmatic of the way literature can sensitize the reader to the Now, the new, the near and its “higher vision of inner significance” (WI 848):

Crossing a bare common…in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration, I am glad to the brink of fear. (Emerson qtd. in WI 856)

For James, these lines exemplify an immersive experience of the perceptual stream that bonds the perceiver with the perceived world. The quotidian activity of walking exposes the sensitized subject to the “novelty” of “the world present and alive,” but also to the incalculable uncertainties of an unfinished universe (WI 848). As he further contends, the process of reading Emerson can hone in us this kind of open attention. “We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite exclusively, and to overlook the common,” James observes, but Emerson reinstills a deep-seated sense that “the individual fact and moment were indeed suffused with absolute radiance” (WII 1124). James locates Emerson’s power of “transfiguration”—his capacity to transform the world into something “still new and untried”—in his processual literary language (WII 1125, 1121). Emerson exemplifies what it means to go beyond a descriptive account “‘about’ this object or ‘about’ that,” to both convey and perform the “flights and perchings” of thought and its expression (PP 246, 243). Through his life-long engagement with Emerson’s writing and thinking, James privileges literary means of expanding the capaciousness and enhancing the responsiveness of his psychological and philosophical frameworks.
As the passage James reads from continues, Emerson’s sense of exhilarating and fearful exposure is traced to the surprising experience of self-dissolution:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God…The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. (*EL* 10)

This paragraph crystallizes a key point of intersection between Emerson’s literary project and James’s conception of educational and introspective experience: a notion of selfhood that is composed and decomposed by fluctuations of perception and feeling. In the moment of transparency, one’s sense of self is swept into currents that dissolve “mean egotism” (*EL* 10). As we have seen, metaphors of circulation and erasure—dissipating, evaporating, floating, vanishing selves—are taken by Baudelaire and Proust, and they will likewise be mobilized by Henry James, Stein, and Larsen.18 Transparency, a radical permeability to the surrounding world, is available when the “axis of vision” is coincident with the “axis of things” (*EL* 47). In the moment that the “I” sees all it is reduced to “nothing.” The self becomes a point where these axes intercept one another—a vessel of perception with permeable walls but without predetermined content.

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18 Richard Poirier has shown that the urge towards self-disappearance has long precedence in western literature. Poets since Virgil have explored the possibility of self-eradication (we might recall from the introduction that Proust compared Emerson to Virgil in his capacity as literary guide) (*Renewal* 182).
As James recognizes, it is Emerson’s style—the dizzying leaps and plunges of his sentences—that induces readers to give themselves over to flowing forces that flood the boundaries of the self and melt the borders between sentient and apparently non-sentient beings. The Emersonian “self” is alternately dissolved and discovered in various phenomena in nature, but also in language. As Poirier observes, “our reading-writing brings into existence a moment in which we are actively there, but also a moment in which self-present identity is reportedly lost” (Renewal 201). At the moment Emerson announces the self’s disappearance, he also performs the rediscovery of an “I” that partakes of what it encounters and describes. Passages like one above incite the reader to conjure and reflect on what it feels like to disappear to one’s self. Emerson’s fearful exhilaration segues into a sense of expansive ascendance, but reaching a state of transcendental sublimity is not his ultimate objective. Emerson’s idealist vision of uplifted infinitude is insistently rooted in the finite experience of a fleeting “now.” His vertiginous flights come to “perch” on buffeted branches that take him by surprise. Rather than representing a final destination, the “event” of surprise is simply “the first of a new series”: each perching expands the circle of experience to encompass a wider range of fresh and familiar phenomena (EL 405). The surprise of Emerson’s encounter with the waving boughs is a feeling of unfamiliarity that also registers as recognition. The limbs are “not unknown” because they are continuous with Emerson’s own limbs and because they are moved by the same storm. Carrying forward his first impression of Paris’s Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, Emerson invokes the “occult relation” that mutually transforms human and non-human specimens. In this case, it is human and herbaceous life that inter-animate one another.
Emerson’s compositional method of translating fluctuating feelings into literary forms presents a paradox that underpins an aesthetics of surprise: how can an event that seized and suspends the cognizant self be perceived and reflected upon? In fact, aesthetic expressions of surprise will always be belated; reflection is only possible after the fact. Though Emerson gestures towards an immediate experience of transparency, it necessarily remains opaque to the present moment of writing or reading. In the passage above, Emerson can only recollect the feelings that circulated around a momentary encounter that has already passed. He can neither make those past perceptions present, nor promise any future fulfillment of the event in the form of new knowledge or immutable insight. Emerson guarantees nothing beyond his affirmation that something significant happened in an encounter that cannot be wholly translated. Nevertheless, as Emerson’s, Baudelaire’s, and Proust’s writing makes clear, just the process of belatedly, idiosyncratically, imperfectly evoking surprise in writing remains a powerfully transformative event.
Chapter Two

Henry James’s Syntax of Surprise

“There are two kinds of taste in the appreciation of imaginative literature: the taste for emotions of surprise and the taste for emotions of recognition.”
—Henry James

When Henry James first identified the two ways of appreciating literature outlined in the quote above he described surprise and recognition as mutually exclusive. The cited line comes at the end of his tribute to the work of the recently deceased Anthony Trollope, published in The Century in 1883. The essay praises Trollope for writing “for the day, the moment” and for helping “the heart of man to know itself” (395). In this context, the reader’s emotions of recognition are elicited by the author’s capacity to make his protagonist’s motives transparent. By implication, emotions of surprise only arise when a character’s mind and heart remain opaque, his motivations unclear. James’s praise of Trollope’s transparency, it turns out, is double-edged. It is owing to his uncomplicated and artless lack of form, James suggests, that Trollope is capable of provoking readerly recognition. As James’s own career as a novelist develops, his conceptions of surprise and recognition—as modes of appreciation, but also as narrative structures—undergo significant changes. In early approaches to his abiding expatriate theme, the importance of surprise is displaced by shock. Roderick Hudson (1875), The American (1877), and The Portrait of a Lady (1881) hinge on a sudden moment of recognition where new knowledge arrives all at once. These novels follow a similarly plotted pattern: a paralyzing confrontation between awe-struck Americans and stultified
Europeans forecloses the potential for reciprocity between the continents’ representatives. In each case, the New World innocent’s wide-eyed impressionability is overwhelmed and finally deadened by the shocking blows dealt by a representative of the Old World, whose apparently beneficent motives turn out to be a cover for malicious intent and a nefarious past. Until the moment of shocking revelation James withholds transparent access to this antagonist’s heart and mind from both his reader and his protagonist. The reader’s perspective is focalized through the naïve American so that their shock of recognition is simultaneous (through such simultaneity depends on the reader suspending his or her recollection of previous James novels that share the same story arc and character types).

In his last three complete novels of consciousness, James moves from an organizing paradigm of shock to a more integrative model of surprise. In The Wings of the Dove (1903), The Ambassadors (1904), and The Golden Bowl (1905), the layered opacities of surprise and recognition interpenetrate one another. Instead of cultural collisions between a new-world sense of wonder and a shock-saturated Old World, these novels feature scenes of recognition that open a window (sometimes only a crack) onto a shared middle ground of experience between the representatives of each continent. Whereas shock and recognition converge all at once in the early novels, James distinguishes his late style with an idiosyncratic grammar of time. His set-piece scenes feature labyrinthine sentences that hinge on the distinctive temporal pivot of surprise. No longer marked by a singular moment of full disclosure, recognition and surprise unfold as

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1 The Portrait of a Lady is a transitional work in James’s oeuvre, which intermingles the characteristics of his earlier paradigm of expatriate shock with his later, more integrative model of surprise.
unpredictable and protracted processes. For instance, in *The Ambassadors*’s famous French countryside encounter a potentially violent confrontation is averted by an “overflow of surprise” that reorients the characters’ attention to newly encompass each other’s perspective (*AM* 310). The immersive moment of surprise dilates into a psychologically and grammatically complex web of anticipatory projections and retroactive reflections. “The situation was made elastic” for the protagonist, at the same time that James’s refracted temporality allows his sentences to reflect that elasticity (*AM* 310). Shuttling between past and future tenses, a Jamesian syntax of surprise remaps the present as a commutable frontier of open potential. Accordingly, the protagonist’s and reader’s processes of recognition remain similarly open-ended and impossible to fix. In this chapter, I trace James’s trajectory from the repetitive narrative pattern of shock towards an aesthetics of surprise that extends a narrative horizon of possibility where the fate of his protagonists and the novel form remains suspended before an unknown future.

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*The American* epitomizes James’s early oppositional approach to representing Old and New World relations. The first half of the novel is narrated from the ingenuously optimistic, but also keenly acquisitive, perspective of Christopher Newman. A fellow expatriate brashly characterizes the artless hero’s project in Europe: “‘You’re the great Western Barbarian, stepping forth in his innocence and might, gazing a while at this poor effete Old World, and then swooping down on it’” (*A* 34). Indeed, after successfully making his fortune as a manufacturing magnate in New York, the “superlative American” has come to Paris to seek, “in a word, the best article in the market,” namely, a wife (*A* 37). Newman’s own droll embrace of these hyperbolic typecasts initially suggests that the culturally defined stereotypes of innocent barbarism and old-world corruption can be
playfully inhabited and negotiated. From this vantage, Europe presents a bottomless source of excitement and pleasure. Propelled on his European tour by the transitory “charm of novelty” in his somewhat haphazard search for a never-ending supply of “new impressions,” Newman is the very embodiment of wide-eyed wonder (A 160).

Upon his introduction to Claire de Cintré, the beguiling daughter of the ancient House of Bellegarde, Newman’s distracted impressionability becomes intensely focused. His knack for “piling up consistent wonders” through his “general hospitality to the chances of life” confronts a continental antipathy to any feeling or event that the aristocratic clan is “not perfectly prepared for” (A 7, 98). As Claire’s uncle dryly puts it, “there have been no novelties in our house for a great many years” (A 150). What Richard Poirier describes as The American’s “confrontation between free and fixed characters” entrenches itself through increasingly insistent and seemingly inevitable images of expansion vs. contraction, hospitality vs. seclusion, and freedom vs. confinement (Comic 45). However, while Madame de Bellegarde and her brother are irretrievably incarcerated by their obscure past, Newman’s energetic force of will initially appears capable of liberating Claire from her bondage to the Old World. Viewing himself as “an antidote to oppressive secrets” that paralyze the rest of Claire’s family, “what he offered her was, in fact, above all things a vast, sunny immunity” from traumatically repeating the familial history (A 161).

Newman insistently associates Claire with metaphors of illumination and openness, suggesting she need only claim her rightful place beside him to exchange fixity for freedom: “She was a woman for the light, not for the shade; and her natural line was not picturesque reserve and mysterious melancholy, but frank, joyous, brilliant action” (A
161). Indeed, he figures both Claire and her brother Valentin as “imprisoned Americans” who find themselves on the wrong side of the continental divide (Comic 64). Claire’s “clear bright eyes” gaze out of a face that speaks of New World promise with its “range of expression as delightfully vast as the wind-streaked, cloud-flecked distance on a Western prairie” (A 125). Unlike the previous generation, Claire need only step “across the frontier of friendship” to “find the region vast” with Newman in the New World (A 119).

*The American* turns on a sudden reversal that stamps out Newman’s sanguinity and with it, the novel’s lighthearted tone. The Bellegardes’ retraction of their consent for Claire’s hand in marriage is the first of a series of incidents that leave Newman “profoundly shocked” (A 235). His complacent confidence in the capacity for sheer force of will to steer his future is shattered all at once by inexorable forces that operate with “the strength and insolence of Destiny herself” (A 161, 251). The same impressionability that made Newman receptive to wonder is now recoded as his vulnerability to the ceaseless bombardment that overtakes the remainder of the novel. While these shocks violently impinge on Newman’s experience of the present and his prospects for the future, the source of their gravitational force is located in the Bellegardes’ harrowing past, which pulls him irresistibly into its deadening orbit. Recognizing it is his “tranquil unsuspectingness” that has left him so exposed, Newman abruptly trades in openness for guardedness (A 162).

Up to the point of the Bellegardes’ betrayal, *The American* has primarily been focalized through Newman’s previously good-humored attention to the here-and-now. In the latter half of the novel, the culturally defined roles that Newman has approached
lightheartedly congeal into the immovable fixtures of timeless, tragic melodrama, complete with a fatal duel, a gothic convent, and patricide revealed. These hyperbolic plot twists are treated with humorless solemnity; if any comedic narrative vestiges remain, they are at Newman’s expense. The narrator now holds him at a distance and observes that “there was something lugubriously comical in the way Newman’s thoroughly contemporaneous optimism was confronted with this dusky old-world expedient” (A 273). Here, the narrator ironizes Newman’s stalwart hope that his unflagging determination to claim his intended prize will eventually outstrip both the Bellegardes’ vigilance and the inevitability of tragic fate. When the now ineffable Claire finally cloisters herself away in a Carmelite nunnery beyond both Newman and her family’s possessive reach, any meaningful connections formed across continental borders are definitively denied.

Newman’s swift passage from innocence to disillusioning experience is matched by the novel’s equally abrupt shift in tone. The disconcerting switch from mannered levity to melodramatic gravity suggests James’s difficulty in bridging an apparently insurmountable gulf between American and European categories of experience at the level of plot and form. Leon Edel sums up a number of critical perspectives on how the novel derails itself: “What happened to The American was that it set off in one direction—a direction that gave great pleasure to its reader—and then it sharply veered into pathos and disaster” (“Afterword” 328). Peter Brooks understands James to be attempting to choose between different novelistic models without yet mastering their integration (62). The novel’s apparent lack of formal coherence manifests an insurmountable continental divide in its generic divide between comic and tragic modes.
There is no space in *The American* where the representatives of the Old World and New World can meet on a middle ground. If the novel had remained in the comedic mode Newman may have achieved communion with Claire and Valentin through love and friendship, but such an outcome depended on their predisposition for “frank, joyous, brilliant action.” In the novel’s economy these attributes are aligned with an intrinsically American capacity for freedom. With the onset of melodrama, however, Claire is reclaimed by a gothic model of old-world femininity, living entombed in “monastic rigidity,” while Valentin dies at the height of tragic masculinity in a duel of honor (A 263).

Unable to loosen stultifying social and novelistic constraints, Claire and Valentin are condemned to mortification, while Newman’s capacity for wonder and humor is entirely overtaken by the deadening shocks of their tragic world. However, the novel does not portray a progressive *Bildungsroman*-like character development from innocence to experience, but simply exchanges one category of experience with another. Dealt a decisive blow, Newman becomes himself a vengeful dealer of them, perpetuating the repetitive cycle of repression and eruption that consumes the latter half of *The American*. Here, similarities can be drawn with *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, which are marked by a similarly dramatic turn in their second halves. A sense of future potential and plenitude that stretches out in the first half of the novels suddenly retracts as each of the Americans abroad is overcome by an oppressive old-world past and drawn into lockstep with an inexorable fate—literal death, or the death of the vital world of the present with their retreat into isolated, unchanging misery. Unlike Roderick Hudson and Isabel Archer, Newman re-crosses the Atlantic, but his return to America
finds him as numbed as the Bellegardes he tried to leave behind: “he was himself surprised at the extent of his indifference…he tried to interest himself and to take up his old occupations. But they appeared unreal to him…the end of his strong activities had come” (A 343). The only surprise he can muster is directed towards his own disinterest. Finding nothing of his formerly vigorous self in America, Newman ultimately returns to Europe, seeking a solitary existence as empty of shocks as it is of wonder.

The same dichotomies that assert an insurmountable divide between American and European experience in James’s early novels—new vs. old, innocence vs. experience, freedom vs. fixity—also map onto the schism that Walter Benjamin establishes between urban modernity and the authentic traditions of an irrecoverable past. For Benjamin, the capacity for a wonder-filled fullness of experience is projected back into a nostalgically longed for past, while James’s early novels project it back onto America. Whether the receptive capacity for wonder is located “back there” or “back then,” shock is the source of geographic and temporal rupture.\(^2\) These continental rifts and historical breaks are established by an antagonistic logic that dictates violent force will ultimately overpower vulnerability. As we will see, however, James ultimately overturns this earlier oppositional novelistic structure with an open-ended narrative framework of surprise.

Since Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) privileged the Jamesian moment of revelation—where complete relations are comprehended in a flash and the

\(^2\) *The American* therefore demonstrates how the divisiveness of shock can be spatialized to run along continental as well as temporal lines. The novel inverts the oppositions that defined the Europe-centered account of modernity so that shock is aligned with the Old World’s corrupted traditions, while wonder is generated by the freshness of the New World.
“great hidden facts [pass] into the possession of the reader whole” (176)—the dynamics of sudden recognition have remained a linchpin in critical discussions of James’s novels. Lubbock idealizes a mode of reading that spontaneously and recursively amalgamates narrative details and events into an immediately apprehended unity; new knowledge “spring[s] up complete and solid in the reader's attention,” in the same way it congeals all at once for James’s protagonist. The job of the reader, in Lubbock's view, is not to read: it is “to extract data from the novel that make up mental wholes, to avoid everywhere the temporal flow and affective identifications that infect novel-reading” (Dames, “Wave-Theories” 210). The Lubbockian values of cognitive clarity and wholeness converge on the Jamesian scene, which he sees as facilitating the novel’s temporal and spatial compression into a comprehensive totality. While the process of reading and the novel form necessarily unfold over time and narrative duration, the scene acts as a kind of mnemonic device that arrests the melt of time, momentarily bringing the “shadowy and fantasmal form of a book” into sharp focus (Lubbock 1).

Lubbock’s concentration on the terms of knowledge and suddenness excludes feeling and duration from the Jamesian scene in ways that continue to inflect critical discussions of form and consciousness in his novels. James’s critical prefaces to the New York Edition of his work (1907-1909) place the narrative representation of what he calls “felt life” at the heart of his novelistic project. Yet relatively little attention has been devoted to the relationship between “feeling” and his “scenic” conception of the novel (AN 45). For James, the term “feeling” encompasses an unmediated visceral response to an event and the process of interpreting an influx that simultaneously stalls and spurs reflection and action. His critics have primarily discussed “emotion” or “affect” as
phenomena that either support or overwhelm cognition, generally aligning “emotion” with conscious rationality and “affect” with a more primal unconscious. Martha Nussbaum argues that James’s later work underlines “the cognitive role” emotions play in making judgments that are responsible to the endless complexity of moral life (“Exactly” 348). Similarly, studies of Jamesian consciousness often focus on emotions only to the extent that they support or inhibit the protagonists’ progress towards articulable and thus representable forms of knowledge. In contrast with this cognitive approach to emotion, psychoanalytic discussions of Jamesian desire tend to subsume any plurality of feeling into the unidirectional dynamics of repression and sudden exposure. Affect is pushed beyond the borders of representation and conscious knowledge into the realm of originary trauma. For example, as Kaja Silverman has influentially argued, James’s “extraordinary obsession with the scenic principle” is evidence that his whole “corpus is bound up in some very fundamental way with the primal scene” (159; also see Kohan, Smith, and Veeder).

This equation of the Jamesian scene with either cognitive understanding or primal shock obscures James’s own account of how feeling variously inflects his “scenic system” of representation. The scene, for James, is the narrative unit best suited to representing a structure of experience that his brother William James calls emotion. William’s revolutionary proposition is that “an emotion [is] indicative of physical change, not a cause of such changes” (PP 131). He models an integrated feedback loop

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3 For recent examples of work that moves away from this cognitive understanding of affect in reading James’s novels, see Hillis Miller’s Literature as Conduct and Thrailkill’s Affecting Fictions.

4 William James inverted the view that a psychological state of emotion catalyzes and thus precedes its physical manifestation. As he repeatedly asserts, “the emotion…is
that disrupts the cause-and-effect relationship between an emotional state and its distinguishing physiological signs. A stimulating event or object effects corporeal changes—a set of physiological reactions that might include “quick breathing, palpitating heart, flushed face, or the like”—which are in turn perceived or “felt” (PP 503). The term “emotion” is therefore comprised of two elements: “bodily commotions” and our feeling of them (“What is an Emotion?” 16). While any division between those components is untenable, for the purposes of clear explanation William breaks down the feedback loop of emotion into sequential parts that unfold as follows:

perception of event → bodily response → feeling of bodily response.\(^5\)

Henry James’s late novels have internalized this structure but explanatory clarity is not his primary aim. As Richard Blackmur has argued, “his style grew elaborate to the degree that he rendered shades and refinements of meaning and feeling not usually rendered at all” (“Introduction” AN xxv). The famously intricate sentences of James’s late novels evidence his efforts to convey the complex imbrications of perception and nothing but the feeling of a bodily state” (PP 459). His “visceral theory of emotion” is revised and reformulated over the ten-year period between the initial publication of “What is an Emotion” in Mind in 1884 and “The Physical Basis of Emotion” in Psychological Review in 1894. However, its basic tenets are essentially unchanged through its revisions and remain intact in James’s major statement on “The Emotions” in Principles of Psychology, Vol. II (1890).

\(^5\) Many contemporary theorists of affect fail to attend to the full complexity of William James’s theory of emotion, which Henry James draws on. Guided by Gilles Deleuze’s investment in unstructured intensities, critics like Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg tend to associate the term emotion with delimiting categories that solidify affect’s unstructured flows into bounded subjecthood and narrative forms (Deleuze, “Affect” 164, 174). Henry James (like William) is similarly interested in forces that exceed subjectivity and signification but for him the chief question is how to represent those intensities in narrative form. Like his brother, Henry would reject affect theory’s division of corporeal flows from psychological structures. It is therefore important to distinguish the immersive feeling that circulates in the central scenes of his late novels from free-flowing affective states that “are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations” (Grossberg 25).
sensation that structure “felt life.” Henry’s preferred term signals the conception of experience he shares with William. For both brothers, lived experience is constituted by the commotions catalyzed by objects and events coupled with the feeling of those fluctuations. In short, life is only lived to the extent that it is felt. By quickening sensation and perception into responsiveness, feeling connects interiority with the external world. James focuses on scenes of surprise in particular because the somatic immediacy of encountering the unexpected can be so variously felt and lived. The set-piece scenes of Henry’s late novels demonstrate that the interpretive turn in an emotional feedback loop is not necessarily a linguistic or subjective turn; processes of feeling may give way to cognitive or verbal responses, but they also may not. As a comparison of The Ambassadors with The Golden Bowl reveals, in Henry James’s late novels the unsettling experience of surprise may alternately consolidate or dissolve the perceiver-protagonist’s sense of selfhood and linear time.

Henry James takes two approaches to representing the ineffable facets of feeling over the course of his career. His “scenic system” of representing processes of feeling increasingly incorporates what he calls “non-scenic” elements into his later novels of consciousness (AN 157). A “scenic” treatment of the subject, as James clarifies in his preface to The Ambassadors, is synonymous with its dramatic treatment in the theatrical sense of the word; a scene does not portray anything beyond what would be visible to an audience member watching the action unfold on a stage. Conversation and action are depicted with minimal narratorial intervention and few reported thoughts or feelings. While the scene “closely and completely” describes an exterior view of “what ‘passes’ on a given occasion,” the non-scene shifts the focus inward, from the event itself to a
character’s internal, perhaps imperceptible feelings in response (AN 325). By James’s own admission, only The Awkward Age (1899) and The Tragic Muse (1890)—his most direct efforts to “dramatise, dramatise!”—come close to conforming to purely “scenic conditions” (AN 267, 90).

As James explains, The Ambassadors achieves dramatic intensity not through strict adherence to “scenic consistency,” but through the interiorized perspective of a central consciousness, which determines the course of narrative representation from “beginning to end without intermission or deviation” (AN 322, 317). The theatrically dramatic scene’s “direct presentability [is] diminished and compromised” in order to reveal “true inwardness” (AN 325). The “alternations” between these narrative principles move towards a “fusion and synthesis” (AN 323). The novel’s central episode renders entirely inseparable the elements of immediacy and duration, of dramatic action and an internalized drama of consciousness. The “representational virtue” of these interpenetrating modalities rests on “the charm of opposition and renewal,” of “disguised and repaired losses,” and “insidious recoveries” (AN 326). Indeed, to attend to both the scenic and non-scenic elements of The Ambassadors’s countryside encounter is precisely to recover and repair losses of critical insight that are suffered in their conflation with dramatic or traumatic action. Rather than turning on the typical critical terms of sudden, singular recognition and shocking new knowledge, the episode suspends familiar forms of knowing with variegated floods of feeling.7

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6 See Cameron’s Thinking in Henry James for a probing examination of the location of Jamesian consciousness in his novels and prefaces.
7 For a powerful instantiation of the terms of knowledge and recognition in James criticism, see Yeazell.
James’s exemplary “intensive perceiver” protagonist, Lewis Lambert Strether, overturns a New England mode of “fine cold thought” that “doesn’t admit surprises,” with experiences of Paris that have “taken all his categories by surprise” (AN 71, AM 297, 161). Sent to Paris to retrieve Chad Newsome from the ignoble influence of a married French woman, Strether finds instead of corrupted new-world innocence, “a case of transformation unsurpassed” has taken place under Marie de Vionnet’s tutelage (AM 90). This “phenomenon of change” unsettles Woollett-imparted categories of thinking that have previously left “no room…no margin, as it were, for any alteration” (AM 90, 298). While Woollett remains coldly unresponsive to anything that fails to conform to prior categories of expectation, it is Europe’s representative who inspires sentient responsiveness in the face of newness and unfamiliarity. But it is not simply that the positions of openness and fixity are reversed between the continents. At the novel’s crux, when Strether’s stubborn naiveté is confronted head-on by the illicit intimacy he has long denied, Marie’s capacity to surprise coupled with Strether’s capacity to be taken by surprise come together in a chance encounter where recognition and misrecognition find a strange coincidence with one another.

Initially, however, Strether replaces Woollett’s “fine cold thought” with a “formula” that is equally impervious to surprises (AM 71, 97). Imposing an absolutist interpretation of Chad as an artificially ennobled archetype of “a man of the world” and Marie as a paragon of feminine virtue, Strether stakes himself on a gilded vision of their “virtuous attachment” (AM 97, 112). Even when critics have not explicitly designated the novel’s climactic encounter as a primal scene, Strether’s realization that “they knew how to do it” and “this wouldn’t at all events be the first time” is generally read through the
lens of shock (AM 307). From this perspective, “the scene of revelation” cements Strether’s impotent position as an observer who is traumatized equally by what he has seen and by having been caught in the act of looking (Kohan 234). His refusal to marry Maria Gostrey and his final concession to return to Woollett then represent a culminated failure to fulfill the injunction to “live all you can” as an actor rather than a bystander to one’s own life (AM 132). Ross Posnock conjectures that William James would have deemed Strether “a hopeless case of ‘ontological wonder-sickness’” on the basis that he “renounces an active life for idealist, nostalgic contemplation” (Trial 242). In my view, something new emerges between Strether and Marie at the climactic convergence of the novel’s scenic and non-scenic narrative modes, which is not reducible to originary trauma, nostalgic regret, or even paralyzing inaction.

On the pivotal day in question, Strether sets forth into the countryside outside of Paris, spurred by an “artless” urge towards picturesque “French ruralism,” though his claim of artlessness is immediately belied by his description of the landscape as “the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters” (AM 301). The imaginative border Strether places around the pastoral setting further underscores his pictorial impulse as its “enclosing lines” align with the “oblong gilt frame” of a Lambinet canvas he was too poor to purchase as a young man (AM 302). Whereas he could not afford the painting in his youth, Strether now seeks a tight conformity between the landscape before him and his internal terrain of consciousness. He imagines he is viewing the French countryside through the same window that stood between his younger self and the unattainable canvas so that the temporal and spatial barrier asserted by the phantasmic pane of glass denies any reciprocal exchange between himself and his environment.
Strether contains the scene before him within the frame of previously established interpretive categories that organize his visual impressions; his gaze “sufficiently command[s]” the elements “into a composition, full of felicity,” “a finer harmony…according to his plan” (AM 302, 303).

When two figures insert themselves into the frame, Strether at first succeeds in assimilating them into his idyllic order. The charming couple, he declares, is “exactly the right thing” to complete the desired compositional harmony: “It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture” (AM 307). However, at the same moment that polished aesthetic perfection seems within his grasp, the smooth calm that “the spell of the picture” had cast is disturbed by a “sharp start” (AM 306, 308). Strether’s heightened attention converges on the lady’s parasol, “which made so fine a pink point in the shining scene,” as it twirls to reveal the identity of the couple as none other than Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet (AM 308). Observing the two are “expert, familiar, frequent,” Strether realizes he is intruding on a private tryst (AM 307).

To allay the potential for the situation to spiral into a “sharp fantastic crisis,” Strether extends his initial startle into a “performance” that they can all partake in: “he had but one thing to do—to settle their common question by some sign of surprise” (AM 308, 311, 308). By exteriorizing his surprise into a show of signs that can be recognized from the water, Strether gesturally conveys a feeling that has not yet cohered into thought. In this way, the feeling of surprise becomes readable in embodied actions and expressions, though it momentarily remains an unreadably interiorized state, illegible even to the one experiencing it. Strether alternates between an unprocessed internalization of the surprising event and the externalizing stance of an uninvolved observer who watches
from a detached distance. As he moves between these two perspectives, the scene and
non-scene become increasingly implicated.

When Marie’s reciprocal “overflow of surprise” meets Strether’s own, “the
situation was made elastic” (*AM* 310). The eruption of “violence [is] averted…by the
mere miracle of the encounter” (*AM* 309). Though “their wonderful accident” is charged
by the potential for eruptive conflict, one side doesn’t overtake the other; all are seized by
a surprise event that none anticipated. Strether and Marie pass through fluidly
indeterminate states of mutual responsiveness where the “sudden and rapid” sense of
shock and crisis bleeds into “blankness and wonder” (*AM* 308). Through their shared
effort to float in unknowing “vagueness,” they together find “something to put a face
upon,” so that they can face one another—however shame-faced they may be—on the
common ground of “their friendship, their connexion” (*AM* 313, 310, 313).

Whereas shock is locked in a closed circuit of traumatic repetition, an optic of
surprise opens onto more capacious middle ranges of feeling that suspend and reorient
customary patterns of perceiving and knowing. The gradated intensities of surprise unfold
according to a “law of successive aspects” that shuttles between interiority and
exteriority, but also between a projected future and remembered past that are integral
with the immediate nowness of the present (*IT* 268). James represents an immediacy of
feeling that paradoxically unfolds over narrative time by bringing together what Gérard
Genette terms “prolepsis” and “analepsis”—the narratological equivalents of a cinematic
flash-forward and flash-back. While prolepsis narrates in advance an event that will take
place in the future, analepsis evokes an event that took place earlier than the narrated
present (40).⁸ Both fleeting and protracted, surprise’s distinctive temporal order is comprised of an initially disorienting seizure of startled attention, and an ongoing process of reorienting and reintegrating its interruptive force. At the moment of its sudden dehiscence surprise is not yet stabilized into determinate thought. Only from a projected future moment can it be woven back retrospectively into the fabric of time and understanding. Surprise therefore demarcates a moment discrete within the flow of time, separated out from the past and future, even while it incorporates their lineaments.

In *The Ambassadors*, the narrator proleptically anticipates an analeptic moment when “Strether was to remember afterwards …” and “was to reflect later” on the present instant (*AM* 310). This distinctive convergence of prolepsis and analepsis is also observable in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*: Maggie Verver “was to remember afterwards,” while Kate Croy “afterwards imaged to herself,” and “it was not till afterwards that [Milly Theale] fully knew…” (*GB* 315; *WD* 89, 153). As stated earlier, only by projecting forward into the future can the overwhelming immediacy of the present be reflected back upon—and perhaps better grasped—in the past tense.⁹ With each return to the event of surprise, James’s increasingly elaborate temporal scheme and syntax imbricates the instantaneous with futural projections and retroactive reflections. The aftermath of the countryside encounter is narrated in free indirect discourse that

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⁸ I am indebted here to Dorrit Cohn’s discussion of analeptic prolepses in relation to *The Golden Bowl* (5-8).

⁹ As Fisher observes, “what narrative adds” to an unexpected “all-at-once” experience, which would otherwise remain an “extremely short-lived unique moment of being,” is a protracted breakdown of “the sequence of recognitions that took place in fractions of a second of time” (*Wonder* 25-26). In James’s late novels, this brief “sequence of recognitions” can only be discerned from the perspective afforded by retrospect.
further complicates those entangled temporal registers by enmeshing Strether’s perspective with that of the narrator:

since we have spoken of what he was, after his return, to recall and interpret, it may as well immediately be said that his real experience of these few hours put on, in that belated vision—for he scarce went to bed till morning—the aspect that is most to our purpose. He then knew more or less how he had been affected—he but half knew at the time. (AM 311)

Markers of time function as metanarrative interjections in this passage, adding to its narratological and temporal convolutions and barring any straightforward sense of progress towards triumphant transformation or redemptive resolution.

Critics have carefully attended to what Bill Brown calls James’s “spatializing poetics of cognition,” or the process by which his elaborate metaphors externalize multiple cognitive processes that constitute “thinking” in his novels (Sense 166). However, the spatialization of cognition and delayed absorption of new knowledge cannot be understood in isolation from James’s temporalization of feeling. Likewise, those “instinctive postponements of reflexion” are inseparable from the influx of feeling that catalyzes them (GB 303). The strange temporal turns taken by surprise interrupt a straightforward march from dim confusion to the enlightened dawn of understanding. Instead of securing a static final product of knowledge, surprise produces a moving, changing series of differentials that continually reengage forms of reflective attention contingent on the interpenetration of feeling and thinking. Critical studies that examine time in James’s novels have tended to focus on the “past [that is] always present,” “always spreading out” and relegating future potential into a “retrospective present”
Reading for surprise retrieves an equally vital future dimension of the Jamesian event, which recasts the past and present. The feeling of surprise suffuses the scene of encounter with *éventualité*, to borrow Françoise Dastur’s term—the contingent yet ever-present possibility that something might at any moment take hold and usher us towards an unanticipated future. Clearing previous frames of reference and reorienting attention to the present moment, surprise projects an indeterminate future, opening the possibility that what is yet to come need not repeat what came before.

Strether’s belated processing of his chance meeting with the lovers extends over the course of his return to Paris and over the remainder of the novel. But unlike traumatic repetition, each return to the initial interval opened by surprise further loosens him from entrenched patterns of perception. His field of attention expands to accommodate incalculable forms of relation with and between the pair. Significantly, as Strether apprehends the air of “fiction and fable” that pervades “the charming affair,” he simultaneously realizes that Chad and Marie’s “detached and deliberate” lies are inseparable from “the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (*AM* 311, 313). Even as he is confronted with the liaison he had steadfastly refused to acknowledge, Strether does not fall back on rigid interpretive modes that definitively divide truth from fabrication, and integrity from duplicity. He relinquishes any illusion that the pair’s intimacy can now be fixed as a known entity: it can no more be condemned as a dissolute attachment than it can be valorized as an entirely innocent one. Ultimately, Strether recognizes his

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10 See Esch for a cogent reading of Jamesian time.
culpability in providing “a common priceless ground for them to meet upon”; the admixture “of his art and his innocence” matches the couple’s own (AM 319).

Beyond acknowledging that “his intervention had absolutely aided and intensified their intimacy,” Strether condemns his efforts to fix the ambiguous unknown of human relations: “He had made them—and by no fault of their own—momentarily pull it for him, the possibility, out of this vagueness” (AM 319, 313). Back in Paris, having recognized their mutual implication in “the situation,” Strether and Marie once again come face to face, newly able to expose themselves to one another with alarming and enabling vulnerability. And yet, Strether’s commitment to suspending himself in vertiginous uncertainty is matched by a competing desire to reground himself in “a certain command of the situation” (AM 320). For the remainder of the novel, Strether struggles to strike a difficult balance between swimming in vagueness and charting a course of action, so as not to feel “too much at sea.” As Joan Richardson points out, The Ambassadors’s pervasive use of the word “vague” and its variations (“vaguely,” “vagueness,” “waves,” “wavering”) is connected with the novel’s ubiquitous metaphors and tropes of nautical navigation through uncharted waters, as well as with the related “figures of mooring, bridges, sinking, shipwreck, the ‘abyss’” (145). Cast adrift in the aftermath of the countryside episode, Strether “give[s] himself quite up” to floating indeterminacy rather than anchoring himself with moral conclusions (AM 316). He refuses to judge the attachment as necessarily unvirtuous, but also refrains from entirely detaching himself from it. Having relinquished all sense of direction and control, Strether simply floats, “well in port, the outer sea behind him.” There he “rested against the side of his ship,” treading water in “the iridescence of his idleness” (AM 327). Letting
whatever comes wash over him without resistance, Strether practices immersive receptivity as his primary form of activity.

Strether plunges deeper still into the metaphors of aquatic immersion when he compares his time in Paris to floating down the “sacred river” of Xanadu in Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan” (1816): “It faced him, the reckoning, over the shoulder of much interposing experience—which also faced him; and would float to it doubtless duly through these caverns of Kubla Khan” (AM 327). The Alph of Coleridge’s poem “ran through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea”: it traces a labyrinthine subterranean path, “five miles meandering with a mazy motion,” passing through “ceaseless turmoil seething,” erupting “momently” into “a mighty fountain,” before sinking “in tumult into a lifeless ocean.” Strether, like the poem’s narrator, seeks a “mingled measure” where he can be “floated midway on the waves” between dead calm and violent eruption, between fluctuating activity and immobile passivity (Coleridge 212-13). Henry James’s maritime metaphors and his commitment to the vague are elaborations, as Richardson further observes, of the fluid images of flow that his brother uses in The Principles of Psychology to characterize “the stream of thought” (PP 145). William’s project, in his own summation, is “the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life” (WI 164). Henry, like his brother, emphasizes vagueness in order to signal the gap between experience—understood as an immersive continuum of fluctuating sensations and feelings—and the language we have at our disposal to try to represent that experiential flow.11 But whereas William remains invested in language as an instrument of clarification that will help bridge this gap, Henry

11 See also Poirier’s “The Reinstatement of the Vague” in Poetry and Pragmatism.
exhibits the fundamental uncertainty and opacity of language in his struggle to find a syntax that is expressive of endless flux.

As a process of apprehension that exceeds comprehension, surprise can be understood as a form of “prehension,” to draw on Alfred Whitehead’s term. Just as one is *seized* by Jamesian surprise, the mind is *gripped* by a prehensive event that arrives prior to its cognitive registration. Notably, the terms share etymological roots in the verb to seize or grasp. In Tomkins’s system of affects, surprise similarly marks an influx of sensory information that seizes attention and suspends its processing. But before either thinker had theorized the prehensive event of surprise in philosophical or psychological terms, James had elaborated it as a structure of perceptual attention and of narrative. It is no accident that these three thinkers and writers conduct complementary investigations of the indeterminate interval between an unexpected encounter and a cognitive or linguistic response. Both Whitehead and Tomkins declare their indebtedness to William James’s psychological structures and methods, just as Henry’s conception of “felt life” owes a debt to his brother’s model of emotion. But, as argued in the previous chapter, it was

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12 See Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* (1925) for his discussion of prehension as “uncognitive apprehension” or the processing “of things of which at the time we have no explicit cognition” (69-73). For prehension’s relation to the “event,” see Meyer’s *Irresistible Dictation* (24) and Richardson’s *Natural History of Pragmatism* (248 n.41). Jean-Luc Nancy specifically connects his conception of the event with surprise, contending, “the ‘surprise’ is not only an attribute, quality, or property of the event, but the event itself” (91).

13 Tomkinsian surprise instigates a momentary hiatus between a stimulus and our affective, cognitive, or motor response to it. Surprise thus precludes an entirely automatized behavioral feedback loop (*Affect* 498).

14 Whitehead follows William James’s lead in criticizing the way that Western philosophical thought from Descartes onward has excessively privileged “clear and distinct” conscious perception to the neglect of “body, emotion, inconstancy and change, the radical contingency of all perspectives and all formulations” (Shaviro x). His conception of prehension recovers processes of apprehension that precede or exceed
Emerson who guided William’s explorations of the contingencies of perception and emotion. Acknowledging the limits of his own field’s articulations of experience, William James asserts that in literature “a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by” can be viscerally felt in addition to being imparted and understood (PP 245). Exactly where William saw his explications of emotionally-charged experience foundering, Henry’s late novels, like Emerson’s essays, express and enact in their tortuous sentences the feeling of surprise. While William echoes Emerson’s calls for a “vehicular and transitive” language, Henry responds with new syntactic and narrative forms (EL 463). This is the difference between the respective ways that William and Henry mobilize Emerson’s phrase “the conduct of life” (also the title of his 1860 collection of essays). Though both brothers subscribe to what Henry calls “a religion of doing,” it is the novelist who insists that “to ‘put’ things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them…belong[s] as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom” (AN 347). For William, reading Emerson trains a way of life that is open to surprises; for Henry, this kind of
cognition. Whereas a Cartesian tradition privileges the mind’s capacity to grasp and possess its object of knowledge, a prehending mind is gripped by an event that exceeds full understanding. In his opus, Process and Reality (1929), Whitehead makes prehension coterminal with “feeling.” He extends James’s theory of emotion with his assertion that processes of feeling structure experience in general. “Attribut[ing] ‘feeling’ throughout the actual world,” Whitehead contends that “the basis of experience is emotional” insofar as every experience consists of a bodily response and a second-order reflection on that response (Process 177, Adventures 176). For William James’s influence on Whitehead, see Meyer’s Irresistible Dictation (24) and Richardson’s Natural History of Pragmatism. For his influence on Tomkins, see Demos (212-16).

Richardson clarifies that while James did not experiment within the unit of the sentence, the expansive scope of his work pushed “larger syntactic boundaries” with a style that reflected “the processual nature of the changing habits of mind” (131).
responsiveness to the unexpected and unknown is inseparable from questions of narrative representation.\(^\text{16}\)

While the brothers were growing up, Emerson was a fixture in their lives as Henry Sr.’s best friend and as William’s godfather. In life, he loomed as an icon for the James boys. It was only after his death in 1882 that William began to read Emerson with keen and close attention that quickly came to inform every aspect of his thinking and writing. Henry, however, was not as immediately receptive to Emerson’s literary influence. Early in his career he held up Emerson as a moral exemplar but took little account of his writing. Around the time that he was composing *The American*, Henry’s critical writings characterize Emerson as an unworldly innocent who has successfully sheltered himself from the corrupting European influences that breed a numbed cynicism in an early protagonist like Newman. The same measures that afford Emerson “a ripe unconsciousness of evil” also leave him, in Henry’s view, largely insensible to the finer complexities of more cosmopolitan cultural forms (*LC* 254). He suggests that Emerson’s simplicity of vision remains uncontaminated by Europe and modernity to the detriment of his aesthetic sensibilities. In an early review of a biography of Emerson, Henry asserts that “the wonder of Boston” manifests an overflow of feeling unhindered by form (*AU* 359). “Failing to strike us as having achieved a style,” Emerson’s “remarkable outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground” is “not composed at all” and can be valued on “the

\(^{16}\) Nevertheless, it remains a critical commonplace to argue that Henry simply “conveys” his brother’s psychological models with hyper-perceptive protagonists who serve as “accurate representations” of the processes of consciousness and perception that William formulates (Ryan 76). For notable exceptions see Posnock, Cameron, and Joan Richardson.
strength of his message alone” (*LC* 271, 265, 270, 271). With his assertion that Emerson “never really mastered the art of composition,” James upholds Matthew Arnold’s contestation of “Emerson’s complete right to the title of a man of letters” (*LC* 262, 250). Instead of directly engaging with Emerson’s work James presents a character study that depicts the writer as a passive conduit of natural wonders and moral lessons.

Other critics who contest Emerson’s literary merit tend to complain about his contradictory and unsystematic prose. But James’s appraisal is just the opposite owing to the scarce attention he affords Emerson’s essays. He focuses instead on the “private correspondence” that best captures the “texture of [Emerson’s] history”—a texture he deems unvaryingly flat (*LC* 252, 250):

> As most of us are made up of ill-sorted pieces, his reader…envies him this transmitted unity, in which there was no mutual bustling of crowding of elements.

> It must have been a kind of luxury to be—that is to feel—so homogenous. (*LC* 252)

In privileging the private and personal over the compositional, Henry misses what William values first and foremost in Emerson’s writing: the unsettling unpredictability of spiraling sentences that he deemed “as fine as anything in literature” (*WII* 38).

Countering claims of homogeneity, William embraces Emerson’s heterogeneous literary

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17 Tellingly, at the beginning of his career, Henry James’s major assessment of Emerson is his reading of Elliot Cabot’s biography, *The Life of Emerson* (1887), which he reviews for *Macmillan’s* in 1888. Henry’s early assessment of Emerson as an idealist figure of transcendental wonder aligns with a canonical tradition of what Posnock has termed “Emersonianism”—“the cultural appropriation and mythologizing” that simplified “the actual complexities and tensions in Emerson’s notion of self-reliance” to mean romantic individualism and idealism (304 n.10). He goes on to give a more nuanced account of Emerson’s connection to Transcendentalism and the Concord School in *The American Scene* (1904-1905), which considers his literary merit in ways that were largely absent from his early critical writing.
forms for the way they sensitize us to what is familiar, frequent, or close at hand. Far from separating his message from the medium, Emerson’s “mission,” according to William, was to find “the worthy form of each perception”: “his genius was insatiable for experience, and his truth had to be clad in the right verbal garment. The form of the garment was so vital with Emerson that it was impossible to separate it from the matter” (*WII* 1119). Emerson’s vertiginous turns of syntax and sentiment perform an ongoing process of disorientation and reorientation so that the question which opens “Experience”—“Where do we find ourselves?”—must be asked again and again without ever resolving into predictable certainties (*EL* 471). As Stanley Cavell puts it, “contradiction, the countering of diction, is the genesis of [Emerson’s] writing” (*Etudes* 113).¹⁸

William’s continual insistence that “Emerson’s mission culminated in his style” offers a corrective to dismissals of the writer’s perceived formal failures (*WII* 1120). Over the years that Henry was composing his last three completed novels, William’s letters narrate his “reading of the divine Emerson, volume after volume” and attest to the enriching experience of immersing himself in those writings (*LWJII* 190). Those volumes inspire him “to report in one book, at least, such impression that my own intellect has received from the universe” (*LWJII* 190). In May of 1903, as the centenary celebration of Emerson’s birth approached, William wrote to Henry with redoubled fervor in anticipation of the address he was preparing to deliver in his honor:

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¹⁸ Tanner traces Emerson’s “naïve eye” through various American modernist strategies for capturing the newness and potential of each present moment. But for Tanner as for James, the source of Emerson’s influence is in the purity of the transcendental vision—his longing to feel the world in all its wholeness as the child does—rather than in the formal facets of his writing (9).
Emerson is exquisite! I think I told you that I have to hold forth in praise of him at Concord on the 25th… You too have been leading an Emersonian life—though the environment differs to suit the needs of the different psychophysical organism which you present. (LWJII 191)

Henry’s response to his brother on the eve of the commemoration is two-fold. He writes of his “longing to sit in the audience at Concord” and wishes him well with a metaphor of floating that owes as much to Emerson as it does to William: “May you be floated grandly over your cataract—by which I don’t mean have any matter of fall, but only be a Niagara of eloquence, all continuously, whether above or below the rapids” (LWHJ 429). In that same letter the expatriate commits to return to the United States after a thirty-year absence. Though he had written about America throughout his extended period away, Henry expressed fear that distance and time had rendered his subject an abstraction. He determined that the only way to counter its growing impalpability was to return from whence he came so that “experience may convert itself, through the senses, through observation, imagination and reflection now at their maturity, into vivid and solid material, into a general renovation of one’s too monotonised grab-bag” (LWHJ 426). Only by moving across the ground of his “birthplace” could he hope to recapture its “poetry of motion” (LWHJ 427, 425). Henry thus supports Emerson’s contention “that motion, poetry… affect[s] our convictions of the reality of the external world” (EL 38).

During the years that William’s correspondence with his brother featured Emerson most prominently, Henry was transitioning into what F.O. Matthiessen called his “major phase.” Commentators have suggested multiple factors that potentially contributed to Henry James’s distinctive late style. However, an overwhelming emphasis
on what Edmund Wilson first termed “the shock of recognition” in his late novels of consciousness has obscured the fact that those scenes of recognition are structured by the Emersonian temporality of “an everlasting Now”: a temporal paradigm that reorients attention from moment to moment instead of in a singular moment of breakage (Society 167). Though Henry determined early on that he already knew what to expect from the “moralist,” his brother’s correspondence and writings at the turn-of-the-century introduced him to Emerson’s oeuvre as if for the first time (LC 269). Henry initially defines both Emerson and his innocent American protagonists by the unalloyed “unity” of their vision (AN 171). His late novels depict a variegated field of perceptual receptivity shaped by the ongoing process that Emerson describes as rendering oneself “impressionable” to surprises (WL 965). Newman bore an uncanny likeness to James’s reductive depiction of Emerson’s naïve new-world sense of wonder, while Strether comes to resemble more closely the Emerson who approaches life as a “series of surprises.” However, as both writers make clear, to dwell in this state of radical openness is not naïvely to idealize an escape into child-like innocence or solitary retreat. Though Emerson celebrates “the impressionable man” as “the great man,” he also emphasizes that opening oneself wide enough to register “infinitesimal attractions” as “new perceptions” entails precarious exposure and the loss of any stable sense of a perceiving self (EL 965). Likewise, Strether exemplifies the risks involved in immersing oneself in the “incessant movement” of experiential flux (EL 412). Having been “surprised out of [his] propriety” the Jamesian protagonist cultivates a “way of life…by abandonment” (EL 414). Rather than offering liberatory transcendence, the process of self-forgetting inheres a perilous relationship of mutual remaking that yokes together the agent and recipient of
surprise. This, says Emerson, is “the secret of the world”: “the tie between person and event. Person makes event, and event makes person” (EL 962).

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As William James writes, “each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit” (PP 401). Strether chooses to inhabit an unsettled, unfinished universe by committing to delve into the undefined vagueness of human relations. But his willingness to be carried in unpredictable directions by the currents of experience is just one way of responding to an unknown world of chance. On the other end of the spectrum is Adam Verver of The Golden Bowl, who reacts to incalculably contingent forms of intimacy by circumscribing them within proscribed and restricted arrangements. Whereas Strether imagines giving himself over to the watery labyrinth of passages subtending Kubla Khan’s city, Verver’s mission throughout the novel is to establish his own Xanadu: “a stately pleasure dome,” “girdled round” with “walls and towers” that distinguish the cultivated “garden bright” from the encroaching forest (Coleridge 212-13). Like Khan’s stronghold, the bordering walls of the Verver estate demarcate strict divisions between inside and out; cultivated order fortifies against the chaos beyond and below. In this scene, Verver paces restlessly to and fro on the terrace overlooking the manicured gardens of Fawns, his palatial country home in Kent. He is desperate to resolve “the vagueness [that has] spread itself about him like some boundless carpet” (GB 152). He thinks “in a loose, an almost agitated order, of many things…He truly felt for a while that he should never sleep again till something had come to him; some light, some idea…that he had begun to want, but had been till now, and especially the last day or two, vainly groping for” (GB 153).

Then, suddenly, the “light broke for him at last”: 
As at a turn of his labyrinth he saw his issue, which opened out so wide, for the minute, that he held his breath with wonder. He was afterwards to recall how just then the autumn night seemed to clear to a view in which the whole place, everything round him…lay there as under some strange midnight sun. It all met him during these instants as a vast expanse of discovery, a world that looked, so lighted, extraordinarily new, and in which familiar objects had taken on a distinctness that, as if it had been a loud, a spoken pretension to beauty, interest, importance, to he scarce knew what, gave them an inordinate size. The hallucination, of whatever he might have called it, was brief, but it lasted long enough to leave him gasping. The gasp of admiration had by this time however lost itself in an intensity that quickly followed – the way the wonder of it, since wonder was in question, truly had been the strange delay of his vision. He had these several days groped and groped for an object that lay at his feet and as to which his blindness came from his stupidly looking beyond. It had sat all the while at his hearth-stone, whence it now gazed up in his face. (GB 155-56)

Verver conjures the figure of a maze in order to announce his emergence from its convolutions. In his account, the labyrinthine period of uncertainty ends with his turn onto a suddenly expanded and clarified field of vision. The question that plagued him was how best to manage his newly configured, formerly exclusive relationship with his recently married daughter Maggie. Light is thrown on his “issue” in the sense that he has come up with a solution to the problem of his solitude and to Maggie’s sense of responsibility for him. Verver describes his decision to marry his daughter’s closest friend Charlotte Stant as a flash of illuminating reason cutting through dark uncertainty:
“Once he recognized it there everything became coherent. The sharp point to which all his light converged was that the whole call of his future to him as a father would be managing that Maggie would less and less appear to herself to have forsaken him” in having married another (GB 156). But the dark underbelly of Verver’s “issue” remains obscured. The double sense of the word “issue”—referring both to his conflict and to the offspring that is the source of his internal battle—points to the unarticulated core of Verver’s problem: he must learn to view Maggie as his daughter rather than the wife she has long stood in for. The full depth of their intimacy will remain submerged beneath a carefully constructed edifice of cognitive clarity.

The clear path Verver draws from dim confusion to a lucid course of action is interrupted by a gap that falls between the minute “he held his breath with wonder” and the following sentence that begins with the distinctive Jamesian locution: “He was afterwards to recall.” As in The Ambassadors, Verver’s perceptual reorientation takes place in an indeterminate interval between an unexpected turn and a projected time “afterwards.” From the belated vantage of this “afterwards” he can reflect on the moment the “light broke for him ” as a remembered past. These proleptic and analeptic turns mark James’s distinctive syntax of surprise—a syntax which gives place to experiences that cannot be understood or articulated as immediately as they are felt. As in the preceding novel, James’s use of free indirect discourse makes it impossible to extricate Verver’s voice from the narrator’s retrospective and projected viewpoints. But unlike Strether, who remains enmeshed in the uncertainty of these mingled temporalities and perspectives, Verver decisively denies any lingering indeterminacy in the wake of his encounter with the unexpected. Instead, he uses hindsight to claim commanding control
over the scene. By the time he has exhaled his held breath, Verver has already smoothed over all dislocations of time and knowledge. He swiftly claims the “sharp focus” of enlightened understanding. In this way, Verver recasts the murky “situation” of his unspeakable incestuous desires as a solvable “riddle” that can be “all supremely cleared up” by his “moral lucidity” (GB 156). Just at the moment that Verver claims to dispel all ambiguity, his formulation of a lock-and-key resolution to a solvable problem illustrates how language continues to assert its fundamental opacity, even as he attests to its transparency: “It wasn’t moreover that the word, with a click, so fitted the riddle,” he says, “but that the riddle, in such perfection, fitted the word” (GB 156). The question is redescribed in such a way that Charlotte can be the simple answer to his daughter’s filial guilt. However, Verver’s phrasing also raises the specter of linguistic ambiguity. He describes his “riddle” as a language problem whose key is simply “the word”—a word that can’t be named.

Reflecting on what happened in the moment he held his breath, Verver insistently frames his reconceived “issue” in the terms of wonder; the word is repeated three times in a single paragraph. “The wonder of it” lies in the all-at-once arrival of a resolution, but also in the “strange delay of his vision,” with vision defined as full comprehension. Until the moment that “everything came together” Verver “groped and groped for an object that lay at his feet.” He thus figures the moment of recognition as an externalized encounter with an object of knowledge that “had sat all the while at his hearth-stone, whence it now gazed up in his face” (GB 155-56). But what precisely does he recognize in the face reflected back at him? Even as Verver decisively marks the end of the brief “hallucination” that delayed understanding, he relies on a phantasmic object encounter to
usher uneasily cognized feelings into containable, domesticated forms. He stages a face-to-face encounter with himself, but one that only confirms a story of rationalized mastery over irrational desires.

Verver’s description of his passage from bewilderment to cognitive mastery enlists tropes of new world wonder. He reenchants the rolling spread of his own property “as a vast expanse of discovery.” His explorer-gaze bestows “familiar objects” with “beauty, interest, importance” so that they appear “extraordinarily new,” freshly vested with distinction. Framing the object encounter as a moment of “wonder,” Verver can have it both ways: he can discover and lay claim to objects of value as if for the first time, but he can also imagine that he was in possession of them all along. Innocent amazement can coexist with cognitive control. By equating a poetics of wonder with a poetics of thought Verver carries forward a Cartesian legacy that privileges cognition over feeling and wonder over surprise. As discussed in the Introduction, Descartes values wonder first and foremost because it supports rational thinking, learning, and retention (Passions 59). When progress from ignorance to knowledge is the only esteemed path it is easy to overlook or to reject registers of experience that remain unassimilable to conscious intelligence. For Verver, as for Descartes, surprise is a dangerously unknown quantity to be contained at all costs.

*The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* exemplify the challenge of pinning down a Jamesian syntax of surprise when it is so often subsumed into more strident announcements of shock and wonder. With its fractured grammar of time, surprise frequently falls between James’s circuitous sentences. Yet it is detectable in temporal disjunctions that circumvent a clear-cut trajectory towards full comprehension or
dramatic revelation. When surprise is collapsed with shock, the experience of suddenness is coeval with rupture; when it is subsumed into knowing wonder, the end-goal of clear comprehension overwrites non-cognitive forms of engagement.¹⁹ Reading for surprise reveals how structures of time and perception emerge as a consequence of feeling in James’s late novels. As James’s prefaces to the New York Edition of his oeuvre reveal, his method of composition was guided at every stage—from conception, to drafting and revision—by his desire to feel surprised by the processes of reading and writing.

James’s critical prefaces develop a theory of feeling that brings together the psychological and aesthetic dimensions of his late style. As the event of surprise becomes his subject of representation, it also shapes his mode of representation. By determining what seizes and directs the perceiver protagonist’s field of attention, the dynamics of surprise also determine what enters the novel’s narrative field. His prefaces define “life” as “all inclusion and confusion,” while “art” is defined by “discrimination and selection” (AN 120). For James, converting life’s confusion into the structured art of the novel is primarily a matter of marshaling the formlessness of “felt life” into a narrative order: “really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (AN 45, 5). “The sublime economy” of an art that successfully draws such a circle is founded on surprise (AN 120). Coupling startle and interest,

¹⁹ Just as the term surprise first designated an unexpected military attack, “interval” has martial etymological roots. The Latin word “intervalum” literally means a “space between palisades or ramparts” [inter (between) + vallum (rampart)] (OED). Both a zone of contact and of separation, the interval represents an indeterminate region between exposed vulnerability and shielding fortification, between offensive action and a protective reaction.
surprise offers a narrative solution to James’s “exquisite problem”: it allows an expansive sense of relational possibility to coexist with an aesthetic principle of discriminating selection. The feeling of surprise is the primary mediator between “art” and “life” at the moment of the novel’s inception; it is equally instrumental in ushering the “productive germ” into a narrative structure that will sustain a reader’s attention (AN 79). If a “novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life,” as James declares, his ultimate aim is to “produce in the reader’s mind” an impression that “must have much in common with the impression originally produced on his own mind by the subject” (TF 294). To achieve such a correspondence entails cultivating a reading experience that is shaped by surprise in the same way that he describes the processes of writing and revision as having been.

The sudden “flush of life” that constitutes James’s “first glimpse” of the inchoate novel in each case arrives all at once in an unguarded moment, swelling his field of attention to accommodate its overwhelming surge (AN 99, 21). To separate out what is worthy of inclusion from what is not, James asks, “up to what point is such and such a development indispensable to the interest?” (AN 5). Here James refers to both his protagonist’s and his reader’s interest, which he hopes will become indivisible. As “interested and intelligent” witnesses and reporters, Jamesian protagonists “get the most out of all that happens to them and…in so doing enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by fond attention, also to get the most” (AN 62). But how do the movements of the protagonist’s attention foster a corresponding participatory attention in the reader? And further how could any reader match the intensity of feeling and analytic care that James himself invests in rereading and revising his novels for the New York Edition?
Throughout his prefaces, James develops and models an “active, appreciative process” of critical reading that is both emotional and reflective, rigorously structured and creatively open (AN 336). For James, “analytic appreciation” is a practice of penetrating the work’s formal structure in order to partake of the feelings that shaped its narrative form (AN 228). As he reminds us, his later novels are organized around the interpenetration of scenic and non-scenic elements: “we feel, with the definite alternation [between scene and non-scene], how the theme is being treated. That is we feel it when, in such tangled connexions, we happen to care” (AN 158). By bringing form and feeling together as mutually constitutive and invoking a united “we,” James aligns himself with a more general readership. While critical intimacy may be achieved through intensive engagement with those “tangled connexions” between scene and non-scene, form and feeling, James observes that the “finer idiosyncracies [sic] of a literary form seem to be regarded as outside the scope of criticism” (AN 158, 157). Even as James consistently invokes an ideally receptive reader who “happen[s] to care” enough to cultivate the close critical attention necessary for the transmission of feeling, he impatiently interrupts himself to lament, “I shouldn’t really go on as if this were the case with many readers” (AN 158).

Despite the limitations James perceives in literary critical reading as it is being practiced, he perseveres in extending “an earnest invitation to the reader to dream again in my company and in the interest of his own larger absorption of my sense” (AN 345). To absorb the reader into the feeling that catalyzed the work in the first place, James recalls the circumstances of each novel’s conception and composition, establishing vital new “connexions” with the present task of revising them for the New York Edition. His
rereading is animated by twofold “surprises of re-perusal”; the surprise James felt at the novel-germ’s unexpected arrival is revived at each point when he judges that the realized novel has brought its germ into full fruition so that little revision is necessary (AN 157). But while James admits “a certain surprise” when “the march of [his] present attention coincides sufficiently with the march of [his] original expression,” he is equally attuned to “the so frequent lapse of harmony between [his] present mode of motion and that to which the existing footprints were due” (AN 75, 335, 336). The discrepancy James observes between the movements of his past and present attention—“the high spontaneity of these deviations and differences” between his “original tracks” and “present mode of motion”—activates an improvisational reading practice that injects fresh vivacity into his present relationship with his past work (AN 336). Central to this readerly mode is his inability to “forecast chances and changes and proportions” encountered in these shuttling movements back and forth in time; “they could but show for what they were as I went,” James writes (AN 342). He continues, “criticism after the fact was to find in them arrests and surprise, emotions alike of disappointment and of elation: all of which means, obviously, that the whole thing was a living affair” (AN 342). In sum, James assigns literary criticism with the task of revitalizing the “felt life” that brought the novel into being in the first place.

Though James returns to each novel with the advantage of authorial familiarity, he reads them for the surprises they yield, counterintuitively suggesting that intimate acquaintance with a novel may in fact facilitate rather than inhibit the capacity for readerly surprise. Likewise, it is only after two characters establish deep intimacy that they might recover a sense of the other as an unfathomable unknown—an endless source
of surprise. According to James, reading for surprise requires an ongoing “renewal of attention,” which depends less on the original newness of a first encounter than on a deep familiarity that provides the ground against which something unanticipated can come to the fore (*AN* 336). James reads his novels with a penetrative care that persistently hits up against their opacity. His rigorous concentration and fluency must therefore be coupled with the sense that he does not know what he will find when he revisits them. As author, James offers intimate insight into the “accidents and incidents of [each novel’s] growth,” but he maintains that such critical intimacy is not contingent on his status as writer (*AN* 7). James claims reading for surprise as a more widely available reading stance that registers moment-by-moment departures from expectation.

Both Henry James and Emerson resensitize the reader to a fleeting but renewable here-and-now. The Emersonian “event” of surprise holds the promise of a tenuous instant of felt unity: “In stripping time of its illusions, in seeking to find out what is the heart of the day, we come to the quality of the moment and drop the duration altogether” (*Society* 175). For the Jamesian protagonist as for James’s reader, duration cannot be dropped. *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* exemplify the ultimate inextricability of the punctual moment from the durative temporal field in which it is embedded. The instantaneity of the event does not exist separately from the delay in its registration or from the future possibilities it opens up. Just as narrative representation unfolds over time, the process of reading is a necessarily protracted one. The initial experience of reading a James novel involves recursively recollecting what came before and anticipating what will come next, not unlike the way James’s processes of re-reading and revision bring together retrospective reflections with futural projections of how he will be received by
prospective readers. The challenge, for both James and his reader, is not only to inhabit that unsettling state of feeling without knowing, but also to encounter something unfamiliar even in the face of long, intimately invested familiarity.
Chapter Three

Gertrude Stein’s Grammars of Attention;
or, How to Write in America

“She was surprised by anything being something.”
—Gertrude Stein, *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein*

For Gertrude Stein, the question of “how to write” is closely tethered to the question of how to cultivate what she referred to, following William James, as “habits of attention” (*WL 84, PP 286*). Over the first thirty years of her career, those comfortable habits remained largely unchallenged, allowing for the easy exercise of focused yet capacious concentration. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein depicts a daily writing regime that is effortlessly continuous with her lively social life, just as her salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus is coextensive with Paris’s buzzing boulevards. “Much influenced by the sound of the streets and the movement of automobiles,” she composed while strolling through the city: “during those long walks Gertrude Stein meditated and made sentences” (*ABT 209, 206*). Over the three decades of living and writing in France that *Autobiography* spans, Stein deftly navigates a steady stream of social and sensory stimulation. She moves fluidly between domestic and urban spaces with no need to separate composition from the rest of her daily existence. Stein’s practices of meditating and making sentences are guided and sustained by pleasurable feelings of interest and excitement. Throughout this significant period, Stein seems utterly assured of her capacity to selectively register those items she deems “interesting” or “exciting” and
dismiss the rest—in much the same way she masterfully curates the paintings and visitors that populate her salon.

The acts of discernment Stein depicts in *Autobiography* remain indebted to the model of attention that her teacher and mentor, William James, outlined in *Principles of Psychology*.¹ James draws a direct parallel between the way “the artist notoriously selects his items” and “the essentially selective or interested character of consciousness,” which carves up an “indistinguishable swarming continuum” as “a sculptor works on his block of stone” (*PP* 271, 274). Before *Autobiography* was published to great acclaim, Stein likewise represented her discerning interest as an unerring guide that steered her through what James terms the “utter chaos” of the “stream of experience” (*PP* 402). But the sudden celebrity status that accompanied the book’s smash-hit release in the spring of 1933 dislocated Stein’s long-held habits of selective attention, which had up to that point effectively directed and closely synchronized her urban perambulations and language experimentation.

It is common for studies of Stein’s oeuvre to establish an irrevocable break between her “early” and “late” style. Of Stein’s critics, Ulla Dydo has perhaps worked most closely with the vast collection of Stein papers housed in the Yale archives to trace “how experience becomes material for composition and yields the vocabulary for her

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¹ Stein was a favored former student of William James. In addition to studying psychology under him at Harvard, she also carried out experimental work under the supervision of Hugo Münsterberg. But as she asserts in *Autobiography*, “The important person in Gertrude Stein’s life was William James” (*ABT* 96). She published her research on “Normal Motor Automatism” in Münsterberg’s lab with Leon Solomons in *Psychological Review* (1896). In that article, Stein and Solomons argue “that habits of attention are reflexes of the complete character of the individual” (*WL* 84). A number of critics have elaborated the relationship between James’s psychology and Stein’s early theories of composition. See for example, Ashton, Levinson, Meyer, Ruddick, and Ryan.
writing” (Language 9). According to Dydo’s account, Autobiography’s unprecedented success marked a defining split between “Stein’s two voices”: “the voice of words in meditation and the late, strident voice of personality that leads to audience writing, an aspect of personality display” (Language 595). Likewise, foundational studies by Robert B. Haas, Richard Bridgman, and Donald Sutherland contend that Stein came to privilege an “an open and public” manner over the inwardly directed “real kind” of writing that she composed without consideration of any external audience.² For Dydo and others, Stein’s struggle with the unexpected demands and diversions of fame and a newfound audience dramatically compromised the immediacy and integrity of her formerly full, free voice.³

Critics who demarcate the shock of success as a definitive turning point in Stein’s career likewise organize their before-and-after approach to her life and writing around a bipolar model of consciousness and time. These critics charge that externally dictated concerns about securing long-term fame disperse the full presence of Stein’s undivided attention to the here-and-now that had hitherto guided her writing. Such commentary pits Steinian interiority against exterior forces and immediacy against duration, recalling the agonistic pairs that organize rupture-orientated accounts of modernity. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin maps the poles of traumatic shock and deadening habit onto the “polar opposites” of “distraction and
distractedness.”⁴

² See Haas’s A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein, Bridgman’s Gertrude Stein in Pieces, and Sutherland’s Gertrude Stein, A Biography of Her Work.⁵
³ Stein herself used the terms “open and public books” and “real kind of books” in a letter on May 25, 1934 to her agent, W.A. Bradley, who was negotiating with Alfred Harcourt for new book contracts following Autobiography. As Dydo notes, the terms stuck (Language 601-2). Dydo initially intended to exclude from her comprehensive study Stein’s Lectures in America (1934) and the work produced in the years that followed. She eventually conceded that this period of Stein’s career could not be summarily dismissed as “audience writing” and decided to include an extra chapter devoted to Stein’s American tour.
concentration” (*Illuminations* 239). Stein is charged with a failure of focus that radically compromises her receptivity; Benjamin analogously diagnoses widespread “reception in a state of distraction” across the modern masses (240). Thirty years earlier, Georg Simmel equated the inability to pay attention with an incapacity for emotional investments in people and things. He memorably labels this state of perceptual and affective unresponsiveness the “blasé attitude [blasiertheit]” (414-15). In a like manner, Siegfried Kracauer labels the affective consequence of modernity’s over-stimulated, under-attentive state as boredom—a persistent inability to take an interest in the world.  

Stein’s initial response to literary celebrity and the mass reproduction of her work neatly lines up with the oppositional frameworks of these urban theorists. Her first reaction to “the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” that came with fame was to erect a protective barrier around everything that was, as Simmel put it, “happening inside” (410). As Stein declares, “there is no use in the outside…[it] is no longer interesting” (*HWW* 66). Stein’s fears that public exposure would sap the interest that fueled her composition were self-fulfilling. Unfamiliar anxieties prompted a defensive self-isolating response, which only compounded the paralyzing writer’s block that had interrupted thirty years of writing every day. “I was not writing,” she later recalls, “I began to worry about identity” (*EA* 66). Interest vs. boredom, inner vs. outer, public vs. private, concentration vs. distraction—a series of dichotomies define Stein’s preliminary efforts to understand the relationship between identity and writing in the wake of *Autobiography*. As I will demonstrate, however, these terms did not remain polarized in her thinking for long.

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Stein’s ongoing investigation of what Adam Frank has termed “the compositional aspect of affect in perception” brings together seemingly antithetical elements of experience by refusing to abstract the process of composition from its lived circumstances. Frank’s phrase indexes Stein’s career-long commitment to examining the central role that feelings play in shaping our perception of the world and our place in it. “Composition,” for Stein, designates the combination of words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs, but also the arrangement of the material, sensorial, and emotional conditions of writing. As Frank asserts, Stein required of herself and of her reader multiple forms of attention to the grammatical and situational components of writing, which she folded back into the work itself. These forms of attention are “compositional” in the sense that they don’t separate aspects of living and writing that are conventionally held apart in the name of clarity and comprehensibility.

The forms of compositional attention that Stein developed over the course of her career extended a central proposition of James’s Principles of Psychology: “each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit” (PP 424). James’s primary concern with increasing the “clearness” and speed of our “intellectual discrimination” means that he rarely brings his model of attention directly to bear on questions of feeling or aesthetics (PP 426). Though Principles introduces James’s groundbreaking model of emotion alongside his paradigm of attention, the theories are developed in separate chapters that aren’t put into

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conversation with one another; the fluctuations of feeling he describes only enter into his schema of attention as a detrimental distraction. In the pages devoted to attention he gives a single, second-hand example of how feeling informs attention, quoting Wilhelm Wundt to argue for the importance of “anticipatory preparation”: “The surprise which unexpected impressions give us is due essentially to the fact that our attention, at the moment when the impression occurs, is not accommodated for it” (PP 426, 440). When we are inadequately prepared for an unexpected encounter, James contends, we are vulnerable to diversions from the path of knowledge acquisition and useful action. Over the course of his career, James becomes increasingly committed to inhabiting an “unfinished pluralistic universe” that allows for chance and the unexpected (WII 780). But in his influential psychological model of attention, experiences for which we are unprepared represent an infringement on concentration. In response to Principles, John Dewey suggests “that the application of James’s theory of emotion to his theory of attention would give some very interesting results,” but neither theorist takes up the task (“Theory of Emotions” 175). In effect, it is Stein who accepts the challenge. When sudden celebrity threatened to overwhelm her focus on composition, Stein turned from the psychology of William James and found, in his brother Henry, an aesthetic model for encountering the unexpected. Henry James provides Stein with a powerful example for locating surprise at the heart of her compositional practice of attention.

This chapter examines a transitional work that is often overlooked in critical studies centering on Autobiography as a catalyst for the rupturing force of fame. A standard chronology of Stein’s career identifies Stanzas in Meditation (written in the summer of 1932) as the last major example of Stein’s “real writing” and Lectures in
America (composed in the spring and summer of 1934 and delivered in the fall) as the launch of the “personality writing” that would dominate the remainder of her career.\textsuperscript{6} When Autobiography’s publication is taken to mark a decisive divide between Stein’s two voices it is easy to blanket everything that came in between under symptomatic silence. But in the winter of 1933, after months of uncharacteristic difficulty with writing, Stein began to draft a new study focusing on four American luminaries: Ulysses Grant, the Wright brothers, George Washington, and Henry James.\textsuperscript{7} The few critics who do comment on the work she eventually titled Four in America tend to read it as a record of her fraught struggles with fame, audience, personal and cultural identity, which she finally resolved by claiming her public place and voice alongside the “representative Americans” who were her subject.\textsuperscript{8} By contrast, I will show that the idiosyncratic studies of Four in America are not easily subsumed into a narrative of identity crisis and its resolution. On the contrary, they form a crucial pivot point in Stein’s efforts to recast “the problem of the external and the internal” in terms of continuity and integration rather than rupture and opposition (ABT 119).

Four in America is a transitional work in the Winnicottian sense of the word. The defining developmental activity for psychologist D.W. Winnicott is the child’s precarious task of keeping inside and outside, me and not-me, separate but interrelated in “an

\textsuperscript{6} The first installment of Autobiography appeared in Atlantic Monthly in May of 1933 but the book was published as a whole at the beginning of September that same year. Dydo explains the significance of the fact that Stanzas and Autobiography were written in the same summer of 1932 in “Stanzas in Meditation: The Other Autobiography.”

\textsuperscript{7} Four in America was written in late winter or early spring of 1934, but Stein was planning and making reference to it as early as the previous summer.

\textsuperscript{8} As a contemporary reviewer summarized the project, Stein meant “to show how each of her representative Americans would have expressed his genius if he had been in some very different relation to the problems of human experience” (Gray 30 qtd. in Caramello, “Reading” 186).
intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute” (Playing 3). These transitional dynamics do not resolve in completed phases of development but instead constitute the basis of ongoing forms of relational and creative “play” over the course of an entire life. Given that “no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality,” Winnicott asserts the importance of finding “relief” in a “neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” by the task of integrating internality and externality (Playing 18, 17). He suggests that such a “resting-place” is located in the “intermediate” or “third area of potential space” retained in creative thinking and the arts (Playing 3, 72). The intermediate zone “between inner and outer worlds” is therefore directly continuous with the potential space where “intimate relationships and creativity occur” (Playing xii, “Transitional” 89). As Stein’s transitional period following Autobiography makes clear, however, the relationship between art-making and its reception may itself challenge the artist's ability to remain within a “potential space” of creative exchange. It is only by recalibrating the relationship between inner and outer that Stein succeeds in reopening an unthreatened space for composition.

In writing Four in America Stein works to retrain habits of attention she feared had lapsed into deadening distraction. But as she learns in the process of composition, training attention does not mean tightening her focus or honing her interest to a more narrowly selective range. Instead, Stein fosters ever-expanding orbits of attention where exploratory probings are not tethered to a preconceived path and apparently aimless floating is not opposed to cohesion. Rather than exercising single-minded concentration, Stein develops a state of undifferentiated responsiveness that allows attention and
distraction to interpenetrate in unexpected ways. She calls this state “open feeling.”

In The Making of Americans Stein defines “open feeling” as “that kind of being that has resisting as its natural way of fighting” (296). The guiding question of the James section of Four in America—“what if Henry James had been a general?”—returns Stein to her earlier insight that openness can constitute resistance and that “feeling” is her primary way of “being” in the world. Stein explores this form of resilient openness in explicitly military terms in the James section of Four in America. In that essay, questions about identity and audience are explicitly framed as questions about how to write. The martial premise of the essay unexpectedly allows Stein to conceive of the shock of public exposure in terms other than assaultive attack and reactive defense. The model of attention that Stein formulates in response to her “what if?” thought experiment is militant and meditative, protective and permeable. As James exemplifies, the commanding general and the tactical writer are both equipped with strategies of execution for the art of battle and of composition. But ultimately, all the careful preparation for everything “that could happen or not happen” allows them to respond to “what happened as it...happened” (WL 291).

For Stein, “Henry James is a combination of the two ways of writing” that she initially held to be opposed (WL 291). She begins the essay on James by privileging improvisational spontaneity over deliberately planned composition; by its close, she asserts that strategizing and improvising are as welded in James’s work as meditation and premeditation are in her own. From those insights she can begin to articulate enabling

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9 My understanding of Stein’s “open feeling” is indebted to Sianne Ngai’s reading of The Making of Americans in Ugly Feelings (see especially 261, 283).

10 Stein’s fraught relationship to war has been well documented by critics like Whittier-Ferguson, Detloff, Malcolm, Olson, Schoenbach, and Will.
continuities between the “way she used to write,” the way she is presently writing, and the uncertain future of her writing (HWW 66). Looking forward to look back, Stein situates herself in what she describes as the “continuous present,” a temporal order where sustaining connections with the past open onto future horizons of possibility (WL 25). When the present moment of writing is framed in this way, newness, suddenness, and the unexpected can be felt, in Stein’s own words, as “a shock of surprise” that displaces ennui with generative excitement (FA xi).

When Stein names James as her “forerunner,” he appears not so much her “harbinger” as her “guide” (to recall a less frequently used definition of the term) (ABT 78, OED). As her forerunner, James guides Stein back to an Emersonian conduct of life and composition understood as “a series of surprises.” Here we might recall that the etymological roots of both “surprise” and “forerunner” are themselves military. In its original use, “forerunner” referred to an advance-guard that cleared the way for the army approaching the battlefield, while surprise meant being suddenly seized or overtaken by an unanticipated military attack (OED). Stein’s unrelenting commitment to tracing the derivation of each word she uses and exploring every possible context in which it might appear may provide one reason why she continually returns to the unsettling analogy between writing and war.11 Her breezy refrain that “War is a surprise” can be

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11 To cite just two examples, Stein characterizes her lengthy struggle to be published as full of lively conflict that fuels her writing with interest: “wars are interesting because there is a back and forth every minute in a war” (FA 50). By contrast, the lulling “peace time” of success produced in her “a monotone and something of a moan” (HWW 63). Here she speaks to the experience of oscillating between stultifying stasis and directionless anxiety, utterly devoid of the combative momentum that drove the remarkably productive years she wrote without recognition. In Everybody’s Autobiography Stein frames the project of Four in America in these terms: “That is what war is and dancing it is forward and back, when one is out walking one wants not to go
disconcerting in its apparently offhand embrace of militancy (FA 51, 60). At the same time, the comparison between composition and battle allows her to reconnect the key word and event of surprise with its original usage.

The task for Stein, as for James, is to hold open a field of attention where martial discipline goes hand-in-hand with adaptive improvisation. Only with such a supple yet robust creative infrastructure in place can she answer the Emersonian call for singular voices that speak to the immediacy of “an everlasting Now” (Society 167). Stein responds by “beginning again and again” with each new sentence (WL 27). Like James before her, she prepares herself to be surprised by the unknown future of her writing and its place in literary history. By establishing the place of Stein’s work in a longer line of Emersonian surprise, I suggest an alternative to the “genealogy of modern attention” that diagnoses a twentieth century malady of distraction. In Suspensions of Perception, Jonathan Crary contextualizes the contention of Benjamin, Simmel, Kracauer, and others that “perception is fundamentally characterized by experiences of fragmentation, shock, and dispersal” (1). As Crary shows, “the specifically modern problem of attention” became a burgeoning site of research and debate following a shift in conceptions of vision across a range of disciplines at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Enhanced understandings of the sensory apparatus’s complexities were accompanied by a destabilized faith in the full presence of perceptual experience as a reliable foundation for back the way they came but in dancing and in war it is forward and back. That is what I tried to say in Four In America” (EA 109).

12 In Lectures in America, as I will go on to discuss, Stein returns to the phrases she introduces in “Composition as Explanation”: “groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again and then everything being alike then everything very simply everything was naturally simply different and so I as a contemporary was creating everything being alike was creating everything naturally being naturally simply different, everything being alike” (WL 27).
objective knowledge. Without any guarantees for the immediacy or wholeness of subjective vision the idea of attention came to serve as “both a simulation of presence and a makeshift, pragmatic substitute in the face of its impossibility” (4). As discussed, Benjamin argues that states of distraction and boredom have fallen from an earlier capacity for complete concentration. At a time when Stein became acutely aware of the contingencies of her own perception, she developed a model of attention that contests Benjamin’s binary logic and extends the implications of Crary’s study. Crary traces the impact of a perceived “crisis of inattentiveness” across a wide array of psychological and philosophical investigations in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as through the explosion of experimentation in European art at that time (14). Stein directs us to an equally important burst of literary experimentation, which continued to gather momentum on both sides of the Atlantic well into the twentieth century. Where Crary tracks wide-ranging attempts to control the precariousness of attention, Stein lays out a lineage of writers who aim to facilitate rather than fix its fluctuations. The genealogy she draws from Emerson to herself, by way of James, is motivated by the question of how to renew one’s attention on a sentence-by-sentence basis.

The vicissitudes of attention, as this lineage exemplifies, are as dependent on fluctuating structures of feeling as they are on the changing structures of vision that Crary elucidates. An Emersonian “conduct of life,” the Jamesian sentence, Steinian attention—all hinge on surprise. As Christopher R. Miller has argued, “surprise exemplifies a crux in the vocabulary of affect,” with the same word designating an emotional response and its
cause, the feeling and the event ("Wordsworth" 413). The doubleness of the word surprise reminds us that an emotion can be understood as having an internal and external origin, designating both an interior state and an outside force. The dual status of surprise, as something that seizes from without and arises from within, brings together these two understandings of emotion as a physical overtaking and a psychological reaction. For vast the majority of her writing life, Stein embraced just such an integrative experience of surprise.

The model of attention that Stein outlines for Thornton Wilder’s introduction to *Four in America* makes clear that learning to write for both an inside and an outside audience requires the ongoing negotiation of a corporal and psychic threshold. To put it in Winnicottian terms once again, psychological transition is a matter of “body experiences” that are viscerally felt (*Playing* 136). Stein explains her writing process to Wilder in this way:

Now what we know is formed in our head by thousands of small occasions in the daily life….All the thousands of occasions in the daily life go into our head to form our ideas about these things. Now if we write, we write; and these things we know flow down our arm and come out on the page. The moment before we wrote them we did not really know we knew them; if they are in our head in the shape of words then that is all wrong and they will come out dead; but if we did not know we knew them until the moment of writing, then they come to us with a shock of surprise. That is the Moment of Recognition…Now, of course, there is no

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13 My understanding of surprise as both an external force and internal state has been substantially enriched by Christopher R. Miller’s studies of surprise in the work of Wordsworth and Austen.
audience at that moment. There is no one whom you are instructing, or fighting, or improving, or pleasing, or provoking... At that moment you are totally alone in this recognition of what you know. And of that thing which you have written you are the first and last audience. (FA xi)

This passage records the challenge of rendering oneself vulnerably open to “all the thousands of occasions in the daily life” without also taking in preconceived “ideas about these things.” For Stein, the “quality in a composition that makes it go dead” is automatic adherence to conventional lexical and syntactical structures. During the initial period of exposure to fame, it seems that the only way she can stave off pressures towards compositional conformity is to partition an interiorized and solitary “moment of writing” from “daily life.” In asserting this impermeable divide, Stein leaves very little room for indistinction or exchange between the quotidian activities of living and a cloistered practice of writing. However, such a divide conflicts with her commitment to composition that partakes of its ambient surroundings.

For the better part of her career, Stein remained committed to “feel[ing] writing” in both the sensorial and the affective sense of the word (“Pictures” 243). The “physical something” of writing demands the suspension of cognitive knowing in corporeal immediacy. A palpable form of knowledge, which has not yet taken the shape of words, viscerally “flows down our arm on the page” (N 56). As Stein contends in an earlier series of language studies, “whenever words come before the mind there is a mistake. This makes instant grammar...” (HTW 66). It is only when we hold “what we know” in non-linguistic formlessness that we experience a “shock of surprise” at what has just

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14 Stein asserts that the “best writers” are the ones “who feel writing the most” (“Pictures” 243).
passed into language for the first time. In Stein’s formulation, shock is a modifiable rather than monolithic entity. Her partitive construction—a shock of—holds open the possibility that a sudden event can be variously experienced. However, at a time when Stein felt compelled to favor self-sufficiency over the dueling imperative of relationality, she posited a closed model of composition where those shocks of surprise must be internally rather than externally generated. To write, as Stein defines it in the passage quoted above, is to attend to interior bodily fluctuations to the exclusion of all exterior sources of stimulation or recognition. But this strict separation between internal and external space works on the ultimately untenable assumption that the body can be isolated from its environment. In fact, she devotes the lion’s share of her career to demonstrating the body’s coextension with its surroundings.

It is only when “outside” demands loom large that Stein retreats inward, insisting that she is “the first and last audience” of what she writes (FA xi). In this newly exclusive economy of attention, recognition moves in a self-contained circuit between her writing self and reading self, which coincide as both agent and recipient of surprise. Only permitting unexpected encounters with herself, Stein makes moot the question of whether her surprise will be shared by others. Even when “the thing which you have written is bought by other people and read by them,” she suggests that the common ground available for meaningful exchange is severely limited by the fact that “the things they know have been built up by thousands of small occasions which are different from yours” (FA xii). If one insists on shared experience as the only grounds for mutual

15 Stein’s suggestion that she is simultaneously writer and reader of her own work recalls the rhetoric of James’s prefaces to the New York Edition of his work, as I discussed in the previous chapter. But where James elides the difficulties in collapsing these two roles, Stein enacts her struggle to do so.
understanding, as Stein does here, writing for others becomes a futile and detrimental exercise. Stein will eventually find her way out of this quandary by arguing that “understanding” is a matter of enjoyment, but before she has recalibrated the balance between internal and external, she remains wary of disruptive intrusions (WL 282). In order to cloister herself from those perceived threats, Stein amends her earlier dictum—“you will write for yourself and strangers”—and aims to do away with strangers all together (Making of Americans 485).

Stein’s efforts to unilaterally separate inner and outer life, self and other, became impossible to sustain as she imaginatively tried to render a whole nation of strangers less dauntingly strange. At the same time that she claimed to seek and receive only the recognition she afforded herself, Stein also finally committed to a seven-month lecture tour of the United States that she had refused up to this point. Her assertion that she is her own “first and last audience” coexists uneasily with a desire to bring her work to a broader general audience. After first resisting public promotion and asserting the impossibility of conveying the “feeling” of writing through the lecture format, what finally compels Stein to undertake a long series of appearances and addresses in America? How can we account for Stein’s simultaneous disavowal and solicitation of an audience beyond herself?

As I’ve suggested, a common critical response to such questions is that Stein chooses “audience writing” over “real writing,” letting creative solitude give way to ego-driven solipsism. What is at stake is a perceived problem of attention. Publicity and personality-oriented distractions are blamed for overtaking Stein’s vital concentration on the present. Stein’s model of attention may appear to have undergone a radical shift
between *Stanzas in Meditation* and *Lectures in America*. In fact, it was only at a time when she felt uncharacteristically compelled to fix her otherwise mobile conceptions of time and consciousness that Stein began to idealize an internalized present moment of writing, unmoved by external forces or inexorable duration. Her attention was not permanently diverted by distractions, but only temporarily compromised by her impulse to narrow her focus to a point that foreclosed unexpected encounters with anyone or anything beyond herself. When Stein turned to face her audience in *Four in America* and *Lectures in America* she once again expanded her briefly contracted field of attention to accommodate a much wider and more unpredictable horizon—one that stretches forward into an undefined future and back into a revisable past. Stein’s renewed commitment to “open feeling” during this charged period of transition is also a commitment to dwelling in the overwhelming uncertainty of an open-ended universe. Such a universe demands precarious exposure to continuous novelty. By tracing the contracting and expanding, prospective and retrospective turns of attention in the largely overlooked work Stein wrote in the months following *Autobiography*, it becomes possible to establish critical continuities between her early and late style. This writing is thus retrievable from a straightforward narrative of identity crisis that reduces Stein’s later writing to a compromised product of her reduced capacity for concentrated composition.

In *Autobiography*, Stein repeats the famous dictum she introduced in *The Making of Americans*, “I write for myself and strangers,” but asks with frustration “how can one come into contact with any strangers” without any “adventurous publishers” (*ABT* 240). She was made hopeful, however, when her agent William Bradley reported an immersive
experience of reading the manuscript that matched the absorbing enthusiasm she experienced in writing it:

I was instantly fascinated and went on reading, turning page after page automatically, not knowing that I turned them, so completely absorbed had I become in your story…. I had forgotten time, forgotten my lunch, forgotten a dozen things I had meant to do that day, so entirely had I been caught by the spell of your words. (HWW 62)

Before publishing Autobiography, Stein optimistically anticipated that the same seamless transference of interested attention from writer to reader would likewise characterize the wider reception of her book:

It can easily be realized that after these years of faith that there is and was a public and that somtime [sic] I would come in contact with that public, as I said in The Making of Americans which I wrote twenty-seven years ago, I write for myself and strangers, after these years to know that I have public…leaves me unburdened. And the readers of the autobiography will not only read the autobiography but they will read and see everything that has made the autobiography. And so all this which has pleased and contented me will please and content them. (HWW 62)

Stein imagines “contact” with her public to take the form of direct, unimpeded transmission. She anticipates that the gratifying experience she had in making Autobiography will translate into an equally satisfying reading experience. Indeed, Autobiography’s mass popularity suggests that a great many readers took as much pleasure in consuming the book as she did in producing it. And yet, having elicited the
general audience she had long desired, Stein found herself unable to rest easily in the pleasurable contentment she predicted. The feeling of anonymous rather than direct contact had the unanticipated and unsettling effect of alienating Stein from her audience—and also from her own writing.

The wide acclaim Stein received for *Autobiography* was accompanied by immediate requests for a sequel and a promotional tour. Her correspondence between 1933 and 1934 expresses deep discomfort with her new public persona. In response to her publisher’s urgings for more immediately accessible work in the style of *Autobiography*, Stein worried that another book in the same mode would only contribute to a shallow form of celebrity without bringing the full depth and breadth of her oeuvre to a new readership. Likewise, she initially refused multiple requests for a lecture circuit in America, for fear it would be construed as a substanceless publicity tour that disseminated her personality rather than her body of work. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1933 Stein began a series of short reflections on the writing and aftermath of *Autobiography*—what she referred to as her “confessions”—with the aim of developing them into the novel’s follow-up (*Language* 534). Those eventually aborted efforts were intended to fulfill an agreement that Harcourt would reprint *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* in exchange for publishing rights to a sequel to *Autobiography* (*Language* 573). The arrangement initially seemed to serve both parties with Harcourt anticipating another bestseller and Stein hoping that her commercial success would bring the rest of her work to a new audience.

Those unfinished fragments of the never-realized “confessions” record Stein’s labored efforts to tap the vivacious fluency she so easily channeled through the narrative
voice of Toklas. In the first of these compositions, written in April of 1933 and later published as “The Story of a Book,” Stein describes the idyllic scene of writing *Autobiography* in the country house that she and Toklas rented every summer from 1929 forward, located in the French hamlet of Bilignin:

> Every day during those beautiful six weeks of unusually dry and sunny days, in the morning and in the afternoon, I sat and on a little double decked table as near the sunny wall as I could get I wrote about five hours a day…and in six weeks the autobiography was done. (*HWW* 61)

The uninterrupted ease with which the book came into being stands in stark contrast with the subsequent blockage she experienced when it found a wider public than she could have ever anticipated.

At a time when strangers were still entirely uninterested in the fact that Stein wrote for them, she developed a narrative voice in *Autobiography* that allowed her to address herself as her own best reader. Writing as Toklas in the first person about herself in the third person, Stein could generate and receive recognition in a single narrative gesture. But in assuming Toklas’s persona to examine her own work, *Autobiography* also teaches Toklas (her next best reader) how she wants to be read. From this vantage, an interested “stranger” could likewise benefit from those lessons. Stein creates a circuit of recognition that at first appears closed, but she holds open a place for a potential reader who will be in the same position to receive the Toklas-narrator’s direct address. In this way, Stein invites her audience to share in an apparently intimate exchange between Toklas and herself. Alongside immediate intimacy, *Autobiography* achieves the immediate newness of narrative innovation in a hybrid form that combines third-person
autobiography with first-person biography. “Making it the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas made it do something,” Stein later recalls, “it made it be a recognition by never before that writing having it be existing” (N 62). The original novelty of that voice is a primary reason she was unable to fulfill demands for a sequel. Stein could no more replicate its fresh innovation than she could unilaterally shut out the new people and experiences that the book brought into her life. After *Autobiography*, invention and daily routine must take new forms but Stein had not yet established what those might be.

Stein voices her sense of alienation from an impersonal “general public,” but far more disorienting is the estrangement she feels from her “inside audience”—the only audience (save Toklas and close friends) for whom she had hitherto written. As Stein “began to think about how [her] writing would sound to others, how [she] could make them understand,” she interrupts a formerly self-sufficient loop of affirmation between her own voice and ear:

> When the success began and it was a success I got completely lost. You know the nursery rhyme, I am I because my little dog knows me. Well you see I did not know myself, I lost my personality. It has always been completely included in myself my personality as any personality naturally is, and here all of a sudden, I was not just I because so many people did know me. It was just the opposite of I am because my little dog knows me. With so many people knowing me I was I no longer and for the first time since I had begun to write I could not write. (*HWW* 63)

In this passage from “And Now”—an early attempt at giving an account of “what happened from the day [she] wrote the autobiography”—Stein’s famous “I am I because
my little dog knows me” formulation serves as a straightforward narrative of identity crisis and its resolution (*HWW* 63). With the proliferation of “so many people knowing [her],” she does not know herself. Stein’s despair at the dispersal of an “I” that had, as she says, “always lived within myself and my writing” frames identity as something internal and intrinsic, which must be protected under peril of loss.

In this iteration, the “I am I” of Stein’s “little dog” formulation hinges on the causal logic of “because.” Identity becomes dependent on the confirmation of an outside agent—her dog, her audience, her public. However, if we trace Stein’s identity motto back to its first pronouncement in 1929, and forward to its reiteration in the “Henry James” essay of 1934, we find that both those articulations nullify a false choice between public and private registers of selfhood, as well as between inner- and outer-oriented attention. Recontextualized in relation to these earlier and later iterations, the dichotomous thinking that informs the “I am just the opposite” version from “And Now” appears as a temporary departure from Stein’s otherwise abiding commitment to a much more nuanced calculus of compositional identity.

In contrast to the rigid dualisms of “And Now’s” identity thinking, Stein’s first “I am I” formulation turned on an interrogative “what…if…then” construction. As she asks in her grammar study “Saving the Sentence,” “What is a sentence for if I am I then my little dog knows me” (*HTW* 19). In this phrasing, the nature of identity and language are

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16 “And Now” was first published in *Vanity Fair* in September of 1934. Excerpts were later incorporated into *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1936), the sequel Stein finally writes four years after the first *Autobiography*.

17 Further variations on Stein’s “I am I” will reappear in her lectures, but also as a recurring motto in her examinations of “the relation of human nature and the human mind and identity” in *Everybody’s Autobiography* and *The Geographical History of America* (1936), as well as in “Identity a Poem” (1935), which is comprised of fragments from the latter work.
actively queried rather than asserted. Stein works towards a processual grammar of the self and the sentence that resists predetermined forms of expression. What she is “gradually com[ing] to find out” in her language experimentation is that “one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything” (WL 146). If language use is itself an “act of doing” as Stein’s grammar studies demonstrate, then any stable foundations of selfhood evaporate in the present moment of composing. Accordingly, when Stein opens another grammar study with the assertion “I am a grammarian,” her “I am” only exists in the activity of grammar experimentation (HTW 105). Stein’s announcement several pages later that “the subject is grammar” acknowledges that her status as a subject is wholly constituted by her subject of study; the grammar of the sentence determines the grammar of the self (HTW 108).

Five years later, when Stein rephrases the “I am I” statement of her grammar investigations in the opening of “Henry James,” she is trying to return to the way that she “used to write” in a very different sense than in “And Now.”¹⁸ She returns to the way she wrote at a time when her process of composition was saturated by daily existence, with no separation between private and public life and writing. In Four in America she

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¹⁸ Stein’s avowal in “And Now” that she had conclusively solved the quandaries of identity and audience both underscores and misconstrues the key role that Four in America would play in her return to the way she “used to write.” Though she claims there and in correspondence with Bradley in the spring of 1933 to be writing a study of Ulysses Grant—the piece that would eventually open Four in America—it was not until by October 1933 that Stein conceived of the Grant study as a section of a four-part study and began to put pen to paper. At the moment Stein insists, “I write the way I used to write,” her claim that separating inside and outside represents a return occludes her previous commitment to keeping that threshold productively blurred—a commitment she will renew in Four in America. Though “she always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal,” as Stein puts it in Autobiography, the torment of that problem was previously and will once again become the generative source of her compositional experimentation (ABT 119).
maintains, “I am I not any longer when I see. This sentence is at the bottom of all creative activity” (WL 275). In the immediate moment of perception, the distinction between the seeing “I” and the thing seen dissolves, and with it, any consolidated sense of self. This dissolution of self into the process of perception is not experienced as a threatening negation, but as the vital basis of “creative activity.” Stein’s conception of identity is “just the exact opposite of I am I because my little dog knows me” insofar as she neither defines herself by the recognition afforded by others, nor by protecting an essential core self. In Four in America as in How to Write, the compositional “I” and the experiencing “I” mutually constitute each other in sentences where the activities of daily living and daily writing are deeply entwined (WL 275).

Those intimate imbrications of living and writing converge on “the little dog” that was introduced into Stein’s life and into her sentences during the exceptionally innovative and generative period of grammar study and experimentation she sustained between 1928 and 1930. Of this work, she writes, “by way of grammar you get rid of sight and sound in a very intimate way and it leads to a strange sort of liberation” (Stein qtd. in Language 128). Stein’s experimental efforts to integrate her context into her text were catalyzed by several new acquisitions that transformed the texture of her everyday existence. In February of 1929, Stein and Toklas became the new owners of a standard white poodle named Basket. Shortly thereafter, Francis Picabia gave them a Chihuahua called Pépé, and the following month they leased the summer cottage in Bilignin, where they would spend the warm months of each year.¹⁹ Life in Bilignin was patterned by the quotidian rhythms of the Rhône Valley landscape and its inhabitants. Whereas urban

¹⁹ They had previously summered in the nearby Belley.
street life provided a largely non-referential backdrop to Stein’s writing in Paris, the
sentences she composed in Bilignin register the movements of days, seasons, and
weather, as well as those of the people and animals that shaped Stein and Toklas’s “home
in a manoir” (Last Operas 309). In her own summation, she reconceives of “Grammar in
relation to a tree and two horses” (HTW 111).

For Stein, “living within [her]self and [her] writing” over these summers meant
continuously recording her meditations on the ever-changing forms of life around her,
and on moving forms of language: “A landscape moves as does a paragraph” (Stein qtd.
in Language 369). During this period of intensive language study, Stein filled a series
of notebooks or carnets with collections of sentences, which she in turn copied into larger
cahiers, often reconstructing and rearranging those sample sentences into longer
sequences that form various grammatical series. These notebooks, excerpted in How to
Write (1931), read like a commonplace book that draws from the common occurrences of
her own day-to-day experience rather than on the words or quotations of others. Stein’s
grammatical investigations of the relationship between language, identity, and feeling
fused the question of how to write with the question of how to live. At a time when
composition felt constricted to the point that these core components of her existence
could no longer coexist, Stein hearkened back to those earlier years of unconstrained yet
disciplined language study in hopes of recovering the dual sense of focus and freedom
they afforded her. The grammars of the sentence and the self that Stein introduced in
those studies form the basis of the model of compositional attention she develops through
the “Henry James” section of Four in America into her Lectures in America.

See Richardson’s The Natural History of Pragmatism and Meyer’s Irresistible
Dictation for discussions of Steinian sentences and paragraphs as organic forms of life.
According to Stein, grammar as it is conventionally understood asserts limits on what it makes sense to say, not through the imposition of some grand schema from above, but by way of unexamined habits of articulation and association that have become rote through repetition. Stein makes those habits visible by pushing up against standards of correctness and comprehensibility, which she shows are not essential but accrued over time through individual acts of expression. She tracks these accumulated grammatical conventions through a regular practice of observing, recording, and reflecting upon the parts of speech and phrases she encounters in their day-to-day usage. When the relationship between words, sentences, and paragraphs is broken down and defamiliarized, grammar ceases to be an authoritatively totalizing system and is instead recast as a process-based exploration of the limits and possibilities of language use. As Stein explains in “How Writing is Written,” she uses “new constructions of grammar” in order to “get the sense of immediacy” one feels when “one feels anybody else” (HWW 155). Such expansive yet always-provisional grammatical constructions represent her efforts to usher the “feeling” of words “filled with moving” into ever-new syntactical forms (WL 97). In How to Write’s “Arthur A Grammar,” Stein asks, “if you have a vocabulary have you any need of grammar except for explanation that is the question” (HTW 60). Just by querying the necessity of standard rules of language usage we are “returned from grammar” as it is conventionally understood (HTW 60). When the exigencies of “communication” and “intuition” direct the movements of words, “Grammar may be reconstituted” as “a conditional expanse” where “successions of words” are unsettled from accustomed arrangements (HTW 60, 57, 55, 39). Reconceived in the pragmatist terms of doing, “Grammar little by little is not a thing,” but an activity
How to Write exemplifies “A grammar in collection”; instead of a dictatory set of principles, grammar consists in a “list of what is to be done with it” (*HTW* 56-57).21

“Throughout her writing life Gertrude Stein was inventing new grammars for new times in which she was living,” the poet-critic Joan Retallack has observed (*Stein* 75). At a moment when she was negotiating a new audience, Wilder describes her “practice of meditating” in the shared solitude that she learned from country life with canine companionship: “In Bilignin she would sit in her rocking chair facing the valley she has described so often holding one or the other of her dogs on her lap” (*FA* ix). Basket appears again and again throughout the sentences Stein composed during her years of concentrated grammar study, as the proper name of her pet, but also as a noun, and even a verb, when she announces, “I am doing it is Basketing” (*Stein* qtd. in *Language* 364).22 In the constant presence of dogs, Stein developed a process of writing herself “out in relation to something” (*WL* 289). She thus learned to feel alone while in the company of another—whether close or distant, known or anonymous, absent or present.

The cadences of rocking, walking, and coexisting with dogs provide a habitual ground against which “the irruption of the daily life” can come to the fore in Stein’s writing. Wilder observes, for example, “if her two dogs are playing at her feet while she is writing, she puts them into the text. She may suddenly introduce some phrases she just heard over the garden wall” (*FA* xiv). While this unexpected intrusion might give the

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21 According to Ulla Dydo, the “quarry of writing” Stein produced at this time not only worked “to keep her limber,” but also afforded her portraiture a “new freedom” from referentiality in the years that followed (*Language* 340).

22 *How to Write*, for example, is full of statements like the following: “A word which makes basket a name. If it is a name will be confuse with whatever with it they make to name” (*HWW* 550). “All these sentences are fruitful. They may be included in embroidery. How are they placed. They are in a basket. They have a good deal of softness and are very likable. She looks at her knitting” (*HWW* 136).
reader “a bracing shock,” he argues “it refreshes in the writer the sense that the writer is all alone, alone with his thoughts and his struggle and even with his relation to the outside world that lies about him” (FA xiv-xv). What could be construed as external encroachments on a meditative state actually prove vital to its cultivation. Stein’s goal of inhabiting immediacy in writing finally cannot be achieved by isolating processes of thinking and writing from the everyday rhythms of life. Indeed, her abiding aspiration is to have her syntax partake of those rhythms. Retallack defines Stein’s compositional practice as “the moving principle, the literal composing of her daily life as attentive participant in her contemporary moment” (Poethical Wager 160). In other words, writing is Stein’s primary means of heightening and attuning her responsiveness to the time and place in which she is living. This active form of engagement with the world involves a continual shuttling between inner and outer impressions that endlessly enrich and enliven compositional experience. Instead of shutting out the external world, Stein aims to banish preconception in thinking and preformulation in expression with the goal of unmediated encounters.

The general equilibrium Stein established during this period came out of her investigation of the balance that could be achieved between what she characterized as emotional paragraphs and unemotional sentences. Significantly, Stein’s Lectures in America credit both her dog and Henry James with the observation that first appeared as the opening gambit of How to Write: “a sentence is not emotional a paragraph is” (HTW 23). “I found this out first in listening to basket my dog drinking,” she says, but then goes on to affirm that “Henry James being an American knew best” how to put this insight to work in his writing (WL 223). The “new balance” she discovered “had to do with the
sense of movement included in a given space...which is definitely the American thing” (WL 224). Sentences are not emotional, she explains, because they “are contained within themselves and anything really contained within itself has no beginning or middle or ending” (N 20). A sentence has an “immediate existing,” while “a succession of these sentences were used in paragraphing” (N 20, 18). Emotions, according to this formulation, are not felt in the self-contained immediacy of the sentence, but only in the successive unfolding of the much more open-ended form of a paragraph that is “filled with moving” (WL 97). Feeling, for Stein, is a process that depends on movement over time. Her interest in the relationship between emotional paragraphs and unemotional sentences is an interest in the “dynamic equilibrium” that might be struck between open and closed systems of time and of space—between the immediate moment and duration, partiality and wholeness (Retallack, Stein 13).23 The compositional lessons Stein learned regarding the relation between sentences and paragraphs, feeling and attention, in the solitary company of Basket were relearned in the absent presence of James.24

23 I will go on to elaborate Stein’s discussion of the “moving time of space” in emotional paragraphs in the context of her Lectures in America.

24 The dependable regularity of Stein’s daily encounters with her dogs stands in contrast with the series of missed encounters with James that Stein unsuccessfully tried to arrange before his death in 1916. Alvin Langdon Coburn, the expatriate photographer responsible for the frontispieces of James’s New York Edition, attempted at her request to bring the two writers together when she visited London in 1912, but was unable to set up a meeting. “It was one of my tragedies that the introductions were not continued,” Stein writes of James, “a tragedy I felt for myself as well as for him at the time although I never knew him” (Stein qtd. in Davis “Correspondence” 214). While Stein’s connection with James himself remained oblique during his lifetime, she established a strong connection with his writing as a lifelong reader of his work. She also sent him a copy of Three Lives, but it is unclear whether he read it.

Notably, it was James who stirred Stein to get a dog in the first place. As Toklas recalls in What is Remembered, Stein wanted to get a white poodle like the one featured in his novel Princess Casamassima (1886) (124-25). We can then understand Stein’s “I am I” motto as having implicated James right from its coinage when she first got Basket.
Stein agreed to return to America at the time she began to draft the project that would become *Four in America*. It is therefore not surprising that the study confronts head on the difficult question of how to negotiate personal and cultural identity under public scrutiny. The composition of *Four in America* marks the end of the writer’s block that had plagued Stein in the preceding months, but also conveys her growing recognition that a protective barrier intended to hold audience expectations at bay proved equally deadening to thought and expression. In the process of completing this work, Stein moved from defensively dividing inner and outer to confidently asserting that “the outside which is outside and the inside which is inside…are not existing” (*N* 39). As Stein will go on to attest in her lecture “Portraits and Repetition,” the “very interesting” experience of beginning “to feel the outside inside and the inside outside” goes hand-in-hand with a new interest “in the relation of a lecturer to his audience,” which Stein had finally decided to experience first hand in America (*WL* 205).^25^

In a letter written in September of 1933, Stein explicitly frames the project as a confrontation with her apprehensions around audience:

As Henry James would say and what sensations. I am almost getting the better of these strange sensations and it is taking the form of meditations on Shakespeare’s sonnets and Before the flowers which will be a treatise that I know will interest you. I have just begun it and it will be all about audiences, a very fearful subject

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^25^ Stein had in fact delivered lectures before this tour, but none matched the scale and scope of the series she planned to deliver to American audiences.
Stein describes the work as a meditative practice of giving compositional form to amorphous feelings. In the process, she begins to recast those “strange sensations” as sources of interest as opposed to sites of blockage. Reframed in this way, “a very fearful subject” provides a generative place “to begin again and again…and perhaps again to begin again,” rather than holding Stein at a stymied standstill (WL 287).

The “meditations on Shakespeare’s sonnets and Before the flowers” that Stein refers to in her letter became the occasion for her essay on James.26 In James, Stein finds a fellow American abroad who similarly struggled with ambivalent feelings around literary celebrity and America. Both writers came to a point in their career where they were forced to consider how their expatriatism and their reputation of difficulty had the potential to alienate American audiences. Likewise, each somewhat reluctantly came to admit their vested interest in the public opinion of their home country and the massive market to be tapped there. Ultimately, James and Stein took advantage of the publicity generated around the prospect of their return journeys in order to assert their place in a literary tradition where they feared they would be defined by a single work or a one-dimensional personality.27

26 Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded (1931) is Stein’s very loose and eccentric “translation” of Georges Hugnet’s poem “Enfance.”
27 While James had enjoyed success beyond a single work, he was still best known for his early novella Daisy Miller (1878). His later, much denser, novels of consciousness had failed to find a wide audience.

The question of what it means to be a “representative American” co-exists for Stein with the question of how to represent such a figure. *Four in America* is comprised of unconventional portraits of famous Americans premised on a set of “what if” thought experiments. Instead of treating the figures historically, Stein explores the relationship between identity, genius, nationhood, and fame by posing a rhetorical question: what difference would it make if her four subjects had exchanged their military, political, religious, and creative pursuits for an entirely different public persona. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson written in April of 1934, Stein singles out James in particular as an ideal proxy for examining her status as a cultural figure in the American literary field. What distinguishes the piece on James from those on Grant, the Wright brothers, and Washington is her move from a more abstracted and generalized exploration of identity toward an intimate identification with her subject:

I am and have been very full of meditations about direct and indirect vision, and the relation between the writer and an audience either actual or not actual, I have just been writing about four Americans and one of them Henry James has cleared up a lot of things for me that is in trying to put him down. (Anderson, *Correspondence* 85)

James “cleared up a lot of things” that had gotten in the way of Stein’s capacity to feel “full of meditations.” As Stein considers how James learned to live and write in the

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28 Stein introduces her “exciting stor[ies] of what did not happen but might have” with the following questions:

If Ulysses S. Grant had been a religious leader who was to become a saint what would he have done.
If the Wright brothers had been artists that is painters what would they have done.
If Henry James had been a general what would he have had to do.
If George Washington had been a writer that is a novelist what would he do. (*FA* 1)
public eye, she is spurred “to write in the way [she] used to write.” She proceeds not by excluding outside influences and audiences, but by considering how her experience of the here-and-now is both singular and integral with a long-view of the compositional trajectory that brings her back to James. Turning to James, Stein is also returning to the writer who provided her with an initial impetus to write and with the literary model for her first novella.  

When Stein presented *Four in America* to Harcourt in place of a sequel to *Autobiography*, the work was rejected in May of 1934 on the basis that it was not in the “open and public” style of *Autobiography* and left the publishers “a great deal puzzled” (letter from Donald Brace to Bradley qtd. in *Language* 601). As a result, the book was only posthumously published in 1947. Many of the readers who have approached this text since have likewise puzzled over its hermetic recalcitrance to understanding. When it is discussed at all in critical narratives of Stein’s career, *Four in America* is generally framed as a successful working through of her confused ambivalence around audience and identity, which made way for the intelligibility and authority of the public voice she found on tour. However, the book cannot be reduced to a steppingstone in Stein’s progress from confusion to clarity. Much is missed if *Four in America* is taken to be an incoherent first-draft of ideas that only later became lucid in lecture form. Rather, this

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29 *Q.E.D.* was completed in October of 1903 (but only published posthumously in 1950), the year after the release of *The Wings of the Dove*. Beyond quoting Kate Croy directly, Stein’s first novella also draws on James’s triangular structure of character relations and its depiction of those characters’ consciousnesses. Stein’s title could also conceivably be a nod to a quote from *Roderick Hudson*, James’s first novel to depict the love triangle that would recur throughout his oeuvre: “*Quod erat demonstrandum!*” cried Rowland. ‘I think you know the Latin’” (470). See Giesenkirchen for a fuller account of the novella’s indebtedness to Henry James.

30 In Dydo’s summation, these studies present “a great welter of confusing ideas” and can be read as “preparations for the clarity she reaches in the lectures” (*Language* 616-17).
work records Stein’s renewed commitment to unsettling certainties and dwelling in 
bewilderment. As she concludes in the section of the work devoted to James, “clarity is of 
no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean, nor how 
clearly you mean what you mean. But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of 
what you mean…sometimes a great many will have to realize that you know what you 
mean….which is as near as anybody can come to understanding any one” (WL 282).
When a desire for “clarity” is displaced by the force of “vitality”—or what she will 
describe in her lectures as “liveliness” and “excitement”—“understanding and enjoying” 
come to mean “the same thing” (WL 282).31 Writing and reading therefore become a 
matter of taking pleasure in sentences that afford no guarantees or guidance. Accordingly, 
Four in America’s “what if x were y” approach to its subjects refuses to grant any 
grounding assumptions in its examination of the relationship between identity, writing, 
and audience.

The “what ifs” that circulate around “James the General” are particularly charged 
since every hypothetical proposition turns Stein back on herself. In James she found a 
powerful example of “puzzling” writing that could still be embraced in all its bewildering 
complexity. When the editor of Atlantic Monthly rejected her first submission on the 
basis that it would pose “a picture puzzle to our reader,” she responded by pointing to this 
shared quality: “My stuff has genuine literary quality, frankly let us say the only 
important literature that has come out of America since Henry James. After all Henry 
James was a picture puzzle but the Atlantic did not hesitate” (Stein qtd. in Gallup 111).

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31 In “Portraits and Repetition,” she reiterates, “the American thing is the vitality of 
movement…And if this vitality is lively enough is there in that clarity any confusion is 
there in that clarity any repetition. I myself do not think so. But I am inclined to believe 
that there is really no difference between clarity and confusion” (WL 103).
The perplexing difficulty of these writers can be attributed to the “disorienting democracy of attention” they afford to multiple registers of experience that we are not used to encountering at the same time, or in the same sentence (Goble 127). What may be dismissed as obfuscating ambiguity in Stein’s piece on James in fact represents her refusal to abstract her writing from its situational and relational specificity. To privilege perspicuity over perplexity would be to sacrifice this experiential richness.

From Stein’s first foray into writing with the novella *Q.E.D.* in 1903—a work that pays homage to the style and subject of *The Wings of the Dove*—James remains a formative figure that she returns to at pivotal moments over the course of her career. In the unmooring storm of publicity, Stein turned back to her fellow expatriate to find her bearings and reorient herself towards the indeterminate future of her writing. To recall the Winnicottian paradigm of transition, James opens an intermediate or transitional space where Stein can establish a simultaneous sense of separateness and relatedness—with her American audience but also with other American writers. Throughout the piece, Stein identifies herself with James at the same time she defines herself against him, asserting their similarity and difference in the same gesture:

A narrative of Henry James told by some one else telling about some one entirely different from Henry James…she was an entirely a different kind of human being from Henry James entirely a different kind of human being and one who had led and did lead an entirely different kind of life. She lived alone and in the country and so did Henry James. She was heavy set and seductive and so was Henry James. She was slow in movement and light in speech and could change her speech without changing her words so that at one time her speech was delicate
and witty and at another time slow and troubling and so was that of Henry James.

She was not at all at all at all resembling to Henry James and never heard of him and was of another nationality and lived in another country…

This one the one telling the story had always admired Henry James.

So there you are. That is the connection. (WL 308-9)

“The connection” between James and Stein is mediated by the teller of “a narrative” that is both about and not about James—an unidentified third who somehow seems to partake of both of them and neither of them.32 In this passage, writing herself “out in relation to something” means rendering indistinguishable the dynamics of identification and disidentification (WL 289).

The essay proceeds by laying out a series of agonistic dualisms, only to show how they collapse in on themselves in each case. As the title of the opening section immediately signals, seemingly antithetical pairings in fact form “DUETS,” compositions for two voices that require the collaboration of both parts to make a relational whole.

Stein opens with the two questions that prompted her to posit “two ways of writing” in the first place: “What is the difference between Shakespeare’s plays and Shakespeare’s sonnets” and “What is the difference between accident and coincidence” (WL 274). Even before Stein has named her subject, she has displaced readerly expectations as well as James himself by devoting the first ten pages not to the titular expatriate but to

32 Eric Haralson identifies this third as an amalgam of Toklas (who had likewise “always admired Henry James”) and Madame Godet, Stein’s rich neighbor in Belley who “might have killed…another woman” (an Englishwoman with whom Godet kept house) (FA 155). Stein hints at a possible murder motive—a jealous love triangle—and assigns the pseudonym of “Madame Steiner” to the third woman involved (EA 83, Haralson 243). Like Henry James, Madame Godet inspired Stein to write: “every time I want to write I want to write about what happened to her” (EA 85).
Shakespeare, the only person “who has done anything to develop the English language,” according to Stein, “except [her]self, and Henry James perhaps a little” (Stein qtd. in McAlmon 228).

Stein first “found out the difference” between Shakespeare’s “smooth feeling” sonnets, and the more uneven and “lively” texture of his plays “by accident,” which is “when a thing happens” purely by chance (WL 274). However, it is by “coincidence,” which introduces a degree of predetermination around “when a thing is going to happen and does,” that Stein “made [her] discovery” while she was writing Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded (WL 274, 276). Just as Stein blurs “the difference” between an accidental and coincidental discovery, she will go on to merge the two ways of writing she initially differentiates on the basis of whether the writer knows or doesn’t know what is going to be written when she sits before the page. But before Stein can demonstrate the inadequacy of those oppositional pairs as explanatory categories, she first asks what difference it would make if such decisive distinctions could in fact be established.

Throughout “Henry James,” Stein distinguishes spontaneity from premeditation only to show how those apparently irreconcilable positions productively interpenetrate one another. As she first establishes, the knowing writer is guided by a preformed sense of what she will write, as well as whom she is writing for; the present process of writing thus incorporates a sense of prior conception and of anticipated reception. By contrast, the unknowing writer resides in a present uninflected by the past or future; she is entirely engaged in the immediate act of writing. Distinguishing “writing the way you are writing” from “the way you are going to be writing,” Stein posits that Shakespeare’s
sonnets are planned in advance, while the plays more readily and spontaneously express unmediated feeling (WL 276). Stein’s stated goal of “feeling writing” in the “continuous present” would seem to privilege this latter model of writing without knowing. While she holds continual renewal from one instant to the next as the ideal state of attention, when Stein brings the paradigm to bear on James’s writing and her own, it becomes increasingly clear that the two ways of writing constitute dual facets of the same practice. In refusing either to accept definitive answers or to offer clear-cut distinctions, Stein trains herself and her willing readers to loosen the tight trusses of categorical thinking and make room for undecidability.

In the process of querying the difference between these “two ways of writing,” Stein also enacts the process of writing “both ways” at once (WL 276, 287). In one sense, she finds her voice and form as she goes, refusing a preconceived stance towards her subject. She proceeds haltingly, often bafflingly, without suppressing any of the hesitations, inconsistencies, or incongruous associative paths that arise along the way. Where we might expect to see Stein marshalling final conclusions, we find her groping to assemble and reassemble propositions. Importantly, the “perpetually provisional” mode she shares with James’s “restless analyst” of The American Scene does not preclude thorough preparation (CTW 689). Stein’s correspondence and “Confessions” following Autobiography reveal that she had been planning this project for many months. Further, she has been in preparation for years to the extent that she was already drawing analogies between marshalling words into sentences and marshalling troops into battle in How to Write, where she asserts that “a grammar is fought” with “the weapons of precision” and
“positions of the troops” (HTW 59, 72).\textsuperscript{33} Winning the battle of composition requires intimate acquaintance with the contours of landscapes and sentences: “Battles become hills. Hills a grammar” (HTW 89). In those language studies Stein discovers that “premeditation” is not opposed to meditative writing, since premeditated composition is simply “meditated before meditation” (HTW 32). Both “prepared unpreparedness” and “premeditated meditation” are open to “surprise attacks,” which are not warded off but embraced as a source of “start startle startled abundance” (HTW 32, 60, 55). Stein combines painstaking preparation and radical openness in her approach to \textit{Four in America}, which emerges as a product of both knowing and not knowing what she is going to write and how she is going to write it.

Stein’s investigation of two ways of writing is charged by the pressing “question of audience” (WL 277). She frames her examination of the writer-reader relation as a pedagogic scene where she alternately assumes the role of teacher and student in a call-and-response between voices of authoritative command and hesitating uncertainty:

What is an audience.

Everybody listen.

That is not an audience because will everybody listen. Is it an audience because will anybody listen.

When you are writing who hears what you are writing.

That is the question.

\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Autobiography} Stein indicates that the general analogy is also applicable to her: “I [Toklas] often teased her [Stein], calling her a general, a civilian was a general of either of both sides” (ABT 19); “Gertrude Stein’s elder brother once said of me [Toklas], if I were a general I would never lose a battle, I would only mislay it” (ABT 108). For more on Stein and generals see Caramello, \textit{Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and the Biographical Act}.  

Do you know who hears what you are writing and how does that affect you or
does it affect you.
That is another question.
If when you are writing you are writing what some one has written without
writing does that make a difference.
Is that another question.
Are there, is there many another question. Is there.
On the one hand if you who are writing know what you are writing, does that
change you or does it not change you.
That might be an important question.
If you who are writing know what it is that is coming in writing,
does that make you make you keep on writing or does it not…
Perhaps yes perhaps no.
There are so many ways of writing and yet after all there are perhaps only two
ways of writing.
Perhaps so.
Perhaps no.
Perhaps so. (WL 276-77)
The litany of questions is punctuated by repeated exhortations that move between
didactic demands (“everybody listen”) and beseeching entreaties (“will anybody listen”).
While this tortuous line of inquiry may read somewhat haphazardly, it is guided by the
pragmatic criteria with which she weighs the value of each query and proposition: what
difference does it make to one’s experience? Stein returns to this refrain again and again,
but instead of conclusively determining “what does or does not make any difference,” she observes how a consideration of the question “affects” and “changes” her (WL 309). In the excerpt above, as in the essay as a whole, Stein’s tone is impossible to pin down as it ranges from frustration to self-satisfaction, edginess to playfulness, diffidence to confidence.

In Autobiography’s immediate aftermath, Stein is compelled to defend herself against unknown forces that threaten to breach the fortifications of her compositional consciousness. But as she is reminded in reading James, it is insufficient for either the writer or the general simply to patrol with redoubled vigilance the border between inside and outside. James’s successful command of the art of writing depends on his capacity to deliberately plan and creatively improvise in the face of unexpected exigencies: “Henry James is a combination of the two ways of writing and that does make him a general and a general who does something” (WL 291). Though James is thoroughly “prepared” for “winning a battle and a war,” he can also throw cautious “preparation” to the wind (WL 293). Having “no one care for plans” and “no wishes” for an outcome determined in advance, he simultaneously “controls something” and “controls nothing” (WL 287, 294).

For Stein, James embodies the impulse towards “settlement in place” even as he “could adventure to wander way from being a general” (WL 297). She suggests that the roles we find ourselves playing—writer, military leader, celebrity—are as impermanent as the moods we pass through from one minute to the next (WL 294, 298, 297).

Stein’s “Henry James” merges pragmatism’s emphasis on the practical consequences of doing with an Emersonian attention to the transience and impersonality of moods. Emerson’s understanding of experience as endless experimentation urges a
course of conduct that responds to life lived in “the instant field of the present” refracted
through “a train of moods like a string of beads” (WII 1175, EL 473). Stein identifies
Henry James as “a general who does something” but her recognition, following Emerson,
that “we do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of to-morrow,” detaches
action from foreknowledge: “what did Henry James do, neither he nor I knew” (WL 291,
292). The goal of William James’s pragmatic method is “to attain perfect clearness in our
thoughts of an object” by considering “what conceivable effects of a practical kind the
object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we
must prepare” (WII 506-7). However, if “our moods do not believe in each other,” as this
essay suggests with its unpredictable turns of sentiment and syntax, writing that tracks a
“succession of moods” must necessarily wander in bewilderment instead of pursuing
linear clarity (EL 406, 476). Stein’s writing, like Emerson’s before her, stages a central
tension between the desire for settled security and the reality of interminable
unsettlement. “People wish to be settled,” Emerson acknowledges, but it is “only as far as
they are unsettled there is any hope for them” (EL 413). Stein recognizes this sense of
groundlessness to be the condition of writing unmoored from complacent habits of
perception and expression. But even as she maintains that neither life nor writing may “be
seated to settle in place,” Stein expresses the longing to feel comfortably at home in
language and in the world with a question left unanswered at the end of the essay: “what
is to be settled in place of settling” (WL 297).

As Stein writes in *Four in America*, Henry James embodies “a poetic American
thing there might have been” (WL 301). Her use of “might” loosens the otherwise closed
fixity of “have been” and holds open the as-yet unknown potential of a “new continent”
that is also “not new,” insofar as it is “always beginning” (WL 300, 301). Stein frames the
nation and its representatives in the terms of open-ended contingency. When she returns
to James in her lectures, she identifies the “poetic American thing” as “a space of time
that is filled with moving,” which differentiates a new phase of twentieth-century writing
from nineteenth-century British literary forms (WL 97). According to Stein, James ushers
in this spatio-temporal order with paragraphs that “had a future feeling,” whereas
everyone who came before “had the feeling of an ending” (WL 55). This “future feeling”
points towards the uncharted path of a nation still in the making.

In her first major lecture, “Composition as Explanation” (delivered to the
Cambridge Literary Club in 1926), Stein maintains that writing should be about nothing
other than “the time of the composition and the time in the composition” (WL 27). Even
as she “gropes towards a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and
again,” Stein acknowledges the inevitability of imposing a recursive understanding of the
“prolonged present” she seeks: “Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we
are here. This is some time ago for us… Naturally one does not know how it happened
until it is well over beginning happening” (WL 27, 25, 24). Stein projects a future vantage
point (“it is going to be”) from where she might reflect back on the here-and-now of
writing as a recollected past. It is only after it is “well over beginning happening” that she
can recognize and “formulate [what] has been made.” In this way, Stein represents an
immediacy of feeling that paradoxically unfolds over time, incorporating as opposed to
eliminating an anticipated future and remembered past. Four in America’s contingent
time of composition likewise folds the past and future into the present by looking back to
her grammatical experimentation while anticipating her lectures to come.
In the last chapter, I identified recursive and proleptic turns from past to future tense as the idiosyncratic temporality of surprise that characterized James’s late novels, as well as the prefaces to the New York Edition of his work. Stein was one of the few subscribers to this Edition and those prefaces may have offered her a powerful model for reflecting back on a body of work and imagining the future forms it might take. As Stein considers her oeuvre within a framework of surprise, she also prepares herself to meet the surprise unknown represented by the massive public awaiting her arrival on America’s shores in the fall of 1934. In returning to the United States after thirty years abroad, Stein follows the path that James laid out three decades earlier when he too planned a lecture tour of the States after a long absence.34 Both writers situated themselves as distanced rather than immersed observers of their home country, suggesting that it was the “improvised European” who could see most clearly what it is to be an American.35 The parallels between the expatriates’ return journeys are striking and go far to explain why Stein turned to James as an exemplary guide for her transatlantic passage.

At a pivotal point in a career largely devoted to writing about Americans abroad, James sought to recharge his vital interest in a nation that had loomed so large in his imaginative landscape over the years, but which had grown somewhat abstract in the absence of immediate experience. Having just completed his final full novel, The Golden Bowl, James began to contemplate the mammoth project of revising his vast body of work for the New York Edition. At this moment of retrospection, he reflected on the

34 James embarked upon his tour shortly after Stein moved to Europe.
35 I borrow the term from Alex Zwerdling. For Stein’s thoughts on her expatriate relationship to America, see her Geographical History of America, the Washington section of Four in America, and “Thoughts On An American Contemporary Feeling” in Creative Art.
place of his largely unread later fiction in the American cultural imagination and in literary history more generally. To this end, as he writes to William, he planned “to write a book of ‘impressions’ (for much money)” as he traversed the country, eventually publishing that record of his tour as *The American Scene* in 1907 (*LWHJ* 420). Far from grounding his observing narratorial persona in a rooted connection with the homeland, this work opens with a flood of maritime images and metaphors resembling those that circulated through *The Ambassadors*. The “repentant absentee” arrives back in New York on a “warm wave” that breaks “over the succession of aspects and objects according to some odd inward rhythm” (*CTW* 358). Like Strether, James cultivates a “fluidity of appreciation” that allows him to “float” with “a certain recklessness in the largest surrender to impressions” (*CTW* 358, 359).36

Whereas James figures himself and Strether as vessels floating among sensations and impressions, Stein observes an unnamable “something” irreducible to character or consciousness that “floated up there” above James’s paragraphs (*WL* 56). In “What is English Literature,” the first of the lectures she presents in America, Stein identifies a “disembodied” drift in James’s novels as the essentially “American thing” that defines

36 My reading of this opening scene is indebted to Posnock’s account of it *The Trial of Curiosity* (88-89). The purpose of James’s American tour was three-fold. First, his return was charged by the ambition to recapture the attention of American readers, which had waned considerably since the enormous success of Daisy Miller in 1878. As Henry writes to William, “It is more & more important I should go, to look after my material (literary) interests in person, & quicken & improve them, after so endless an absence” (*LWHJ* 420). Looking after his “material interests” meant putting himself back in the public eye with a major lectures series, for which he demanded “a positively quite maximum fee” at colleges and clubs across the United States. Though the speaking tour was lucrative, even more important was the opportunity it afforded James to directly impart his literary critical views to a potential readership with the hopes of fostering a greater appreciation and market for work that had for the most part been met with indifference up to this point. (James qtd. in O’Donnell, “Lecture Boom” 133). Stein returns to America with similar ambitions.
the “future feeling” of his writing, as well as her own, against stagnated nineteenth-century European literary traditions (WL 56, 54, 56). The “American feelings” she detects hovering around his writing are formally manifest in the way a “whole paragraph was detached from what it said from what it did, what it was from what it held” (WL 53). In other words, the paragraph’s content no longer determines its form; rather, the form becomes constitutive of its content. James thus opens the way for Stein’s poetic project of making the process of composition its own subject.

In Stein’s approach to her own lectures, James provides a vital touchstone that allows her to construct a wide-reaching and cohesive American tradition, while carving out her distinctive place within it. By way of James, Stein situates her work in a longer genealogy of writers who similarly organize their grammar of the self and of the sentence around the complex time of composition:

In the American writing the words…began to detach themselves from the solidity of anything, they began to excitedly feel themselves as if they were anywhere or anything, think about American writing from Emerson, Hawthorne Walt Whitman Mark Twain Henry James myself Sherwood Anderson Thornton Wilder and Dashiell Hammitt and you will see what I mean…words left alone more and more feel that they are moving and all of it is detached and is detaching anything from anything and in this detaching and in their moving it is being in its way creating its existing. This is then the real difference between English and American writing and this then can then lead to anything. (N 10)

The American line Stein draws from Emerson through James to herself (and her favored contemporary writers), shares a simultaneous sense of locatedness and dislocation. In
their American usage, words “have within themselves the consciousness of completely moving.” They “excitedly feel themselves” in a range of unpredictable combinations in the sentences and paragraphs they form (N 10). The vibratory excitement Stein attributes to this American tradition exceeds fixed structures of history, geography, and language in order to create and recreate itself in the face of what Emerson calls “this new yet unapproachable America” (EL 485). Stein attributes the excitement mobilizing American words to the country’s open horizon of imaginative possibility. Its expansiveness can “lead to anything.” Whereas British literature’s engagements with “daily island life” are defined by a long historical tradition and a circumscribed land-mass, American writing takes on an uncontainable geographical immensity and an undefined newness of experience (WL 33-34). Instead of a linear unfolding of time, each word and each minute dilates “in every and in any direction” (N 14). She contrasts the overbrimming vitality of American literature with a somewhat overstated account of English literary history’s bounded fixity as a known entity. But though Stein wants to assert a vast continental divide between two disparate cultural experiences and literary traditions, she also acknowledges that American literature develops with and against its British predecessors. Stein compares these two literary trajectories to “see how two nations having the same words all the same grammatical construction have come to be telling things that have nothing whatever in common” (N 7). Though “the words used are the same words” in both literatures, the weight of English literary history and its conventional forms puts “such a different pressure on them” (N 14). American words “feel moving existing inside in them,” which “make[s] them do something that they did not do for those who made the language come to exist” (N 14, 9). The kind of American writing Stein subscribes to is
continually uprooting itself from stultifying conventions to enliven and invigorate formerly deadened words.

The connective glue adhering the American line Stein lays out is finally its “lack of connection”: the writers share a “disembodied way of disconnecting something from anything and anything from something” (WL 56). As Steven Meyer has argued, the American tradition that takes detachment, discontinuity and disconnection as the law of writing is distinctly Emersonian. In the passage cited above, he points out that Stein awards Emerson pride of place as the origin of that literary lineage by positioning his name at the opening of the line and following it with the lone comma in the sequence—a grammatical marker that both sets him apart from the group and distinguishes him at its head (Irresistible 137-42). Stein’s compositional method of detaching words from “the solidity of anything”—namely from settled “daily living”—shares Emerson’s commitment to relentless transition (EL 414). As Emerson famously reminds the reader, “the virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (EL 261). In the work of Emerson and Stein alike, “aversive thinking” is manifested in grammatical and syntactical choices that resist unthinking adherence to convention.37 Meyer goes so far as to claim that Emerson’s “lords of life”—“Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness”—guided Stein’s thinking and writing “even more thoroughly” than they did his own work (Irresistible 141, EL 490). Among these “lords,” Stein values “Surprise” as a chief force of unsettlement.

37 Cavell has devoted many essays to Emerson’s “self-aversive sentences” that have influenced my reading. For his discussion of aversive thinking, see especially “Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representation in Heidegger and Nietzsche,” “What is the Emersonian Event,” and “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” republished together in Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes. I will return to the Emersonian gesture of aversion in the next chapter on Larsen.
Though Stein distinguishes Emerson as the origin of the literary lineage she lays out, it is James who marshals his compositional methods into the twentieth century. Indeed, when Stein asserts that Henry James was “doing what American literature had always done,” I understand her to be saying that his conduct of life, inseparable from a conduct of composition, can be traced back to the source of an American literary tradition we find in Emerson (WL 56). For Stein, James is a hinge figure who serves as her most immediate point of connection to an Emersonian line, but also as her point of departure from it. Though Stein credits James with “finding” and “feeling” the way toward “the method of the twentieth century,” she faults him with stopping short of entirely detaching his paragraphs from narrative sequence; they are still tethered to the movements of plot, action, and character, and remain organized around “a beginning and a middle and an ending” (ABT 78, N 25). In decisively cutting all ties with narrative form, Stein claims to have done “more with the paragraph than ever had been done” (WL 56). She describes a continuous process of “breaking the paragraph down” and reconstituting it to make the words themselves the plot, so that parts of speech displace characters (WL 56). As one critic observes, “all the action is there in the play of one word next to another one” (Cope 11). But doing away with linearity does not mean abolishing duration from the time of composition. The immediate “shock of surprise” that Stein feels in a “moment of recognition” is woven into a web of “open feeling” that stretches over time.  

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38 As I argued in the previous chapter, James’s investment in surprise is also Emersonian insofar as he shares a common commitment to inhabiting and expressing an “everlasting Now” with the idiosyncratic temporal order that characterizes his late style (Society 167).

39 Stein’s “open feeling” spreads out into what Gregory Morson (in another context) has termed the “openness of time,” making room for “middle realms of possibilities” presented by “unpredetermined becoming” (6, 11, 24).
In *Psychology*, a work written “expressly for use in class-room instruction,” John Dewey asserts that “a shock of surprise is one of the most effective methods of arousing attention” (iii, 127).\(^{40}\) Within Dewey’s educational framework, introducing “the unexpected in the midst of routine” serves to refresh and expand the “variety and mobility of psychic life.” It is for Dewey “the very contrast” between habitual rhythms and interruptive surprises that reorients the student into a posture conducive to learning (127). Stein develops a pedagogy of surprise that similarly depends on a productive tension between familiarity and novelty to renew and sustain her own attention and the attention of her audience.\(^{41}\) Her lectures proceed by couching the unknown in the known and announcing new beginnings that are also an extension of what has come before. For example, Stein somewhat paradoxically makes a case for doing away with narrative structure by narrating the progressive development of her work in the context of a founding lineage of American writing. On the one hand, Stein seeks to replace the “the feeling that something followed another thing” with an understanding of narrative that is always moving in all directions (N 18). On the other hand, she articulates lines of continuity between her past and present work, as well as between herself and James in an Emersonian tradition. It is on this foundation that Stein stakes her claims for the indeterminate future of writing beyond narrative “succession in happening” (N 18). Stein retrains her own receptivity to surprise by learning to write and talk about her work, but it

\(^{40}\) Though Crary does not pursue the point further, he offers in a footnote that John Dewey and others “had already established the inseparability of a model of attention from experiences of shock, dissociation, and novelty” as early as the 1880s” (49).

\(^{41}\) William James likewise affirms the necessity of yoking newness with familiarity for pedagogical purposes: “a teacher who wishes to engage the attention of his class must knit his novelties on to things of which they already have preparations” (PP 447).
is another challenge to train her audience to meet the surprises that her writing poses to their routine rhythms of reading and listening.

_Lectures in America_ introduces Stein’s audience to her oeuvre by instantiating a set of critical terms that have since guided studies of her work. Throughout the lectures, she reiterates several core ideas regarding the relationship between time, feeling, and literary form until they become accustomed refrains: Stein asserts the “continually moving…space of time” as “the American thing”; she commits to “beginning again and again” in the “continuous present”; and she differentiates between “non-emotional sentences” and “emotional paragraphs” (_WL_ 97). These key phrases suggest “effective methods” (in Deweyan terms) of formalizing her commitment to the persistent renewal of attention (Gass 117). Beyond simply repeating these phrases, Stein contextualizes their disorienting strangeness in relation to more recognizable forms of aesthetic encounter.

She recounts her own experiences as a reader of literature, a viewer of art, and a spectator of theater as exemplary points of reference, but then asks her audience members to detach themselves “from the solidity of anything” they think they know about aesthetic experience. For example, “Pictures” moves through a series of idiosyncratically personal views of paintings that Stein attests, “give me pleasure and hold my attention”—from “a panorama of the battle of Waterloo” she saw when she was eight, to gold-framed oil paintings hanging in the Louvre, to Cézanne’s landscapes (“Pictures” 225, 226). Having aligned the listener with her particular perspective on these artworks, Stein introduces excerpts of her very unconventional literary portrait of Cézanne. Whereas one may expect portraiture to have a referential relation to its subject, Stein’s portrait points readers back to her own affectively charged perceptual experience. “And was I surprised,” she asks
herself: “Was I very surprised. I was surprised and in that patient.” She then turns readers back on their own experiences by asking, “are you patient” (“Pictures” 235). The suggestion is that patient readers will allow themselves to be as surprised as she is by the representation of her subject. Stein replaces direct description with a “disembodied abstract quality,” which nevertheless is infused by the corporeal immediacy and specificity of face-to-face encounters. When we pair surprise with the patient preparation of perception, close acquaintance with people and paintings alike can give way to novel discovery:

when you have looked at many many faces and have become familiar with them, you may find something new in a new face you may be surprised by a different kind of a face you may even by shocked by a different kind of a face you may like or not like a new kind of face but you cannot refuse a new face. You must accept a face as a face. And so with an oil painting. (“Pictures” 236)

Stein’s insistence that “you cannot refuse a new face” suggests the ethical and aesthetic implications of an attunement to surprise. For Stein, refusing to collapse “different kind[s] of faces” into the comforting familiarity of known entities involves learning how to perceive both people and paintings. The “vibration in the line” laid on the artist’s canvas captures the “intensity of movement” animating “the human form and the human face” (ABT 210). Stein notes that “most people are more predetermined as to what is the human form and the human face,” while a painter like Picasso surprises himself out of preconception by practicing uncompromising attention to “something new” (Picasso 16).

In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein elaborates how the imperative for full responsiveness to faces informs her own literary portraiture. She writes, “I must find out
what is moving inside them and that makes them them, and I must find out how I by the
thing moving excitedly inside me can make a portrait of them” (WL 108). The
“intrinsically exciting” “intensity of movement” she identifies in her subjects and herself
precludes rote representation (WL 108). The ever-changing “liveliness” of anything that
is “alive” and “existing”—terms applied to words as well as to sentient beings—makes
for endless variation in emphasis and accent: “If a thing is really existing there can be no
repetition…it is alive it is never anything in the same way because emphasis can never be
the same not even when it is most the same that is when it has been taught” (N xv). If we
are conventionally taught to look for connections in homogenous uniformity, Stein
suggests how we might begin to relate to people, words, and works of art on the basis of
their irreducible distinctness.

One reader of Stein aptly sums up the challenges and rewards of learning and
relearning to read her writing with the openness to surprise she demands:

what is this vast and contradictory, wonderful and maddening body of work? It
means so much to us, has made so much possible, is so full of pleasure and still
constant surprise. Yet there are long stretches that tax one’s attention, putting the
reader in a difficult position. The work asks us to invent new ways of reading.

(Dita Frölker qtd. in Retallack, Stein 3) 42

The exceptionally warm reception Stein received on her American tour indicates that she
succeeded admirably in conveying to her audience much of the pleasurable interest and

42 As far as I can tell, Frölker is an alter-ego of Retallack—perhaps her vision of Stein’s
ideal reader—who provides wonderfully apt epigraphs for both her books on Stein. The
title she claims to be quoting from—“New Old World Marvels, Washington, DC, and
Paris: Pre-Post-Eros Editions, frothcoming” [sic]—is nowhere to be found. She also cites
another selection from “New Old World Marvels” entitled “Stein Stein Stein Stein Stein,”
as well as one called “Autobio: A Littered Aria” in The Poethical Wager (29, 1).
enjoyment that had motivated (and might also be gleaned) from her “vast and contradictory, wonderful and maddening body of work.” “To hear Miss Stein read her own work,” a journalist reports, “is to understand it…for the first time”:

you see why she writes as she does; you see how from sentence to sentence, which seem so much alike, she introduces differences of tone, or perhaps of accent. And then when you think she has been saying the same thing four or five times, you suddenly know that she has carefully, link by link, been leading you to a new thing. (Stein qtd. in Meyer, “Stein” 107)

Listening to Stein read her work, this audience member learns to approach her writing “link by link,” discerning differences in intonation “from sentence to sentence.” The experience of suddenly knowing “a new thing” is in fact the product of a very “gradual making” (to borrow from the title of one of Stein’s lectures). “She is less invested in the shock of recognition,” Brian Glavey has remarked, “than in the halting, often redundant accretion of knowledge.” In arguing that Stein attunes herself and her reader to surprise, I have also aimed to show that she only “taxes” our attention to the extent that she enriches and expands it. When we read Stein’s lectures almost eighty years after they were delivered, her call to “begin again and again” challenges us to understand her

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43 Sianne Ngai’s definition of a literary or cultural artifact’s “feeling tone”—“its global disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world”—helpfully underscores the affective stakes of reading Stein for moment-by-moment tonal shifts (28). Ngai differentiates her “explicitly feeling-related sense” of tone from the narrower New Critical definition of the term as “a known way of speaking” or a dramatic style of address” (28-29). When the journalist cited above hears the changing intonation of Stein’s voice he is better equipped to detect the fluctuating feeling tones of her sentences on the page.

44 “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans.”

45 This is from Glavey’s unpublished chapter entitled “Gertrude Stein’s Eye Lessons,” which has helped me to think through Stein’s relationship to pedagogy.
memorable formulations as offering provisional support rather than definitive critical
ccepts. To keep our own “habits of attention” from hardening into complacent
certainties we are required to continually “invent new ways of reading” Stein, never
knowing what “new thing” she will lead us to.
Chapter Four

Nella Larsen’s *Novel Weather*

“Then what do you love, you extraordinary stranger?”
“I love clouds…drifting clouds…there…over there… marvelous clouds!”

—Eh! Qu’aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?
—J’aime les nuages… les nuages qui passent… là-bas… là-bas… les merveilleux nuages!
—Charles Baudelaire, “L’étranger,” *Le Spleen de Paris*¹

In previous chapters I have examined the scenic and formal phenomenon of surprise as defined by complex grammars of time and consciousness. For James and Stein, surprise expands a horizon of formal possibility that opens beyond the conventions of plot- or character-driven narratives. In James’s novels of consciousness, surprise is manifest in the twists of his labyrinthine sentences more than in unforeseen twists of plot. Stein goes further when she predicts that the future of American writing will dispense altogether with plotted narrative forms. In her improvisational practice of “beginning again and again” with each new sentence, the words themselves become the plot and parts of speech displace characters.² According to Stein, only when our attention is relentlessly renewed can we open ourselves to surprises in living and writing that are unmediated by preconception. In this final chapter, I turn to a novel that self-consciously

¹ The translation is by Edward K. Kaplan.
² Stein describes her progressive departure from linear narrative forms in “Composition as Explanation” (1924), *Lectures in America* (1934), and *Narration* (1936).
invokes and multiplies the conventions of Anglo-American master plots that James de-emphasized and Stein abandoned all together.

Since its publication at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) has confounded critics with its incomprehensible protagonist and its inconsistent narrative line. The protagonist’s eccentricities are compounded by Larsen’s idiosyncratic engagement with a variety of plot conventions. As we will see, she alternately draws on and undermines the tradition of the tragic mulatta, the migration narrative, the return-to-roots saga, and the marriage plot, among others. If we read James’s and Stein’s progressive retreat from plot as a movement towards modernist innovation, Larsen’s continued recourse to these familiar storylines (however peculiar her combining and reworking of them may be) would appear to indicate her more conventional commitments. The fact that critics have compared *Quicksand*’s desirous protagonist with James’s Isabel Archer and Stein’s Melanctha seems to suggest that Larsen’s work aligns with earlier, less mature stages of those writers’ narrative experimentation. Like the freedom-seeking Isabel, Helga Crane’s maritime crossings are fueled by an unexpected inheritance that supports her yearning for liberation from social constraints. With Melanctha, Helga shares the desire to rush headlong into “a free and whirling future,” but both characters’ momentum suddenly stalls in jarringly conventional endings (*Three Lives* 83). As I will demonstrate, the strange incongruities

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3 James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* was published in 1881 and Stein’s “Melanctha” was published in *Three Lives* in 1909. On James and Larsen, see Lay. On Stein and Larsen, see Blackmer and Silverman. *Quicksand* is in fact a direct response to Stein’s novella. Larsen wrote a letter to the expatriate in 1929 attesting to having repeatedly read the “truly great story”: “And always I get from it some new thing.” Larsen connects Stein’s new ways of saying to her representation of race: “I never cease to wonder how you…should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine” (Larsen qtd. in...
between *Quicksand*’s indeterminate protagonist and its overdetermined plot introduce a narrative order of surprise that unsettles the foundations of the novel’s form.

*Quicksand* famously refuses to explain the rapid shifts in mood that propel its protagonist’s movements from south to north, from America to Scandinavia, and back again. Where we want narrative elaboration, we get gaps and ellipses; where we seek emotional depth, we are met with what critics have termed Helga Crane’s “blank spots,” or the novel’s more general “reluctance to utter” (Ngai 178-79, Dittmar 145). Readers have tended to take two approaches to grappling with the novel’s apparent inconsistencies. Those invested in retrieving *Quicksand* from perceived problems of incoherence frequently fill its “blank spots” with diagnoses of Helga’s sexual repression.  

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*Flowers of Friendship* 216). When Larsen travelled to Paris a year later, hoping “to have the great good fortune of seeing and talking with [Stein],” she found that the writer had left the city the previous day. Though she missed a face-to-face meeting, the novel she had written the previous year (and enclosed with her letter)—represents Larsen’s textual encounter with “Melanctha,” which Stein deemed “the best Negro story [I have] ever read” (Stein qtd. in Hutchinson 248). For more on this epistolary exchange, see George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen* (248, 312, 374-75).

4 In her critical introduction to *Quicksand*, Deborah McDowell holds that readers “have been rightly perplexed” by the novel’s formal contradictions, but recommends that we examine the novel “through the prism of black female sexuality” in order to understand “the conflicting demands of [Larsen’s] racial and sexual identities and the contradictions of a black and female aesthetic.” We are thus better equipped to recognize her “radical and original efforts to acknowledge a female sexual experience most often repressed in both literary and social realms” (xii). Hazel Carby’s equally influential reading of the novel asserts that “the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society” (174). Other critics who focus on the novel’s negotiation of sexual repression include Monda and Tate. Sianne Ngai helpfully summarizes this prevalent “repressive” line: Helga’s “repression is perceived to ensue directly from her entrapment between two equally disabling models of selfhood: “the construction of the black woman as hypersexualized primitive (an image promulgated by certain kinds of modernism) and middle-class ideals of chaste “ladyhood” (promulgated by the genteel, nineteenth-century American tradition of sentimental “mulatta” fiction)” (179). Ngai herself argues that the protagonist’s sexuality is prominently represented throughout the novel rather than stifled until the ending (382n.12).
For other critics, the novel’s discontinuous plot and inconsistent character development are irretrievable indicators of *Quicksand*’s formal failure to achieve “wholeness.”

In this chapter I will argue that *Quicksand*’s formal incongruities are central to Larsen’s project rather than signs of its shortcomings. The novel’s narrative gaps deliberately puncture various Anglo-American master-plots that are invoked in order to be subverted; *Quicksand* continually sets up plotted frameworks only to exceed them. For example, the protagonist’s initial journey from the south and her confrontation with urban life in the north follows the arc of the migration narrative as Farah Griffin has outlined it. Likewise, the final lines of Langston Hughes’s epigraph to the novel—“I wonder where I’m gonna die, / Being neither white nor black”—suggests that Helga will suffer the double negation that conventionally condemns biracial protagonists to a ruinous end. But Helga’s transatlantic traversals extend the migration narrative’s north-bound trajectory, just as her *flâneur*-like freedom in the crowd expands the narrow possibilities

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5 Larsen’s biographer George Hutchinson summarizes the novel’s critical reception in the wake of its publication: “people tried to fit it into patterns to which they were accustomed and, not always satisfied with the fit, found the novel wanting” (283). As one reviewer complains in May of 1928, “The motivation of this character is not always convincingly explained; the intention of the book is not even always clear” (Parsons 540, qtd. in Hutchinson 282). Another contemporary reviewer writes, “as portrayed the character is not quite of one pattern...There is no continuity of development, no wholeness here” (Walton 192). Critics have continued to express frustration at the apparently unmotivated movements of Larsen’s protagonist and plot up to the present. Barbara Johnson encapsulates a number of critical complaints when she observes that “psychological causation is missing” in *Quicksand* (*Feminist Difference* 42).

6 According to Griffin, the migration narrative “is marked by four pivotal moments: (1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant’s attempts to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South” (Griffin 3).
that are open to the figure of the tragic mulatta.\(^7\) For the majority of the novel, Helga’s refusal of all expectation and constraint blurs the narrative frameworks that would render her fully legible. It is therefore disconcerting when Helga’s plot-defying itinerancy is finally subjugated to constrictive conventions. *Quicksand*’s stock ending is startling precisely because the reader has learned to expect open-endedness in place of typical closure. I contend that Larsen juxtaposes the openness of an unpredictable protagonist against the closed boundaries of a novelistic frame in order to confront the limits and possibilities of the novel’s narrative form.

If *Quicksand* stands as a problem novel for critics, in my own work it serves as a test case. Its power to unsettle and trouble its readers has applied productive pressures to three questions that have guided my study of the relationship between surprise and narrative form. First, how do writers narratively represent the feeling of surprise without allowing the conventions of plot, character, and closure to domesticate its interruptive force? Further, how might that narrative representation of surprise solicit a corresponding feeling in a receptive reader? Finally, what difference does the capacity to be surprised make for our experience of the novel and of everyday life more generally? As I will argue, Larsen recalibrates readers’ expectations in order to bring questions of narrative representation into contact with what Emerson calls “a practical question of the conduct of life” (*EL* 943). But Larsen also changes the terms of these questions by demanding that

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\(^7\) Jeanne Scheper argues that Larsen “rewrites those quintessential tropes of modern experience, *la flâneuse* and the crowd, through an African American experience of the city” (688). Helga’s experience of double negation is shared by mixed-race heroines like Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie Crawford and Fannie Hurst’s Peola. Her “ruin” is also prefigured by her own mother, whose race-mixing seduction brought the unwelcome baby, Helga herself, into being (*Freedom’s Empire* 7). On the wider tradition of the tragic mulatta narrative, see Berzon and Sollors. Doyle has also examined the novel in the context of what she calls the “Atlantic freedom plot” in *Freedom’s Empire*. 
we confront the ways that an aesthetics of surprise is conditioned by what Judith Butler has described as “convergent modalities of power,” which are difficult to frame beyond the “list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class)” (267). Larsen reveals these modalities of power to be complicit with the narrative logic of multiple master plots that conspire to flatten her inexplicable protagonist into a categorical type.

While critics often note *Quicksand*’s changeability of mood and mode, no links have been drawn to the novel’s equally changeable weather patterns. In the following discussion I take Emerson’s climatology of moods as a guide for drawing crucial connections between the shifting transience of Helga’s humors and the shifting weather patterns that backdrop her movements. For Emerson, the infinite variability of these internal and external atmospheres confirms that life is a “series of surprises” (*EL* 483). *Quicksand*’s changes in mood and weather converge in the novel’s pivotal scenes of departure, which I will read as a series of surprise “events,” where the predictable and the unforeseen collide. In Emerson’s distinctive use of the term, an “event” is constituted by “trivial experience[s] of every day,” which pass through us like “mutable cloud[s]” and floating moods (*EL* 242, 244). “Person makes event, and event person,” he writes, but these mutual “changes pass without violence”—“without a shock or a leap” (*EL* 962, 8

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8 My notion of “novel weather” is patterned by meteorological as well as affective changes in atmosphere. For a discussion of the latter sense of “atmosphere,” see Ngai (esp. 47, 174). The only critical discussion of meteorological weather in Larsen’s novels I have found was in the footnote of an essay on *Passing* that remarks, “it is interesting to observe how the change in the mother-daughter relationship, before and after the father’s return, is accompanied by a weather change. As a happy encounter between Irene and Clare takes place on a hot and sunny day, which symbolizes the universal harmony, Bellew’s return is accompanied by rain, fog and darkness, symbolizing (d)anger and destruction” (Mrozik n.10).
Instead of marking a singular break, Emerson elaborates the simultaneously interruptive and integrative nature of surprise events; they unfold over time rather than all at once, successively incorporating predictability and unpredictability.

In his 1860 essay collection *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson repeats his assertion from “Experience” that moods, like the weather, are governed by the rule of changeability: “We cannot write the order of the variable winds. How can we penetrate the law of our shifting moods,” he asks (*EL* 1121). The impulsive choice that first catalyzes Helga’s journeying serves to corroborate Emerson’s meteorological maxim: “Life is March weather, savage and serene in one hour” (*EL* 704). Even as she acknowledges she is following the most impractical course of action, Helga insists on leaving her teaching post in mid-March instead of waiting until the end of the semester. In Naxos, a “black belt” college based on Tuskegee and Fisk, Helga flees an educational “machine” that “ruthlessly cut[s] all to a pattern.” The institution tolerates “no innovations, no individualisms,” so that students are stripped of all “enthusiasm” and “spontaneity” (*Q* 4). The sudden departures that follow are in every case precipitated by “an impetuous discharge” which releases high pressures “with a surprising ferociousness” (*Q* 5, 4). In each instance, the air grows thick with rising tensions (and temperatures), making a violent clash feel imminent. But the air is cleared and the threat averted by Helga’s snap decisions to abandon the life she has been leading and begin a new life elsewhere (*EL* 546).

In the novel’s final sequence, drifting clouds gather directive force and finally culminate in a climactic storm. The storm scene stages a confrontation between two critical models of reading literary representations of weather, which divide along the lines
of “repetition” and “difference.”\textsuperscript{9} When understood as repetition, weather represents a predictable phenomenon that can be prognosticated; understood as difference, it remains an indeterminate and contingent force. The first framework suggests that weather constitutes a \textit{closed}, fixed system of signs that needs only to be decoded, while the second charts an \textit{open} dynamic system, where the signs may remain patternless. I will conclude by exploring how these competing models of weather reading map onto opposing worldviews, which Emerson roots in the terms of “fate” and “freedom,” and which William James translates into the philosophical vocabulary of determinism and indeterminism. \textit{Quicksand}’s novel weather interleaves open and closed narrative systems with the unexpected effect of rendering these divergent worldviews indistinguishable.

The interpretative problem that Helga’s impenetrable moods pose to other characters and to the reader is first and foremost a problem of relation. Her strange inscrutability forecloses the possibility of any meaningful relationships with the communities and partners she seeks out, and at the same time she repels readerly identification and sympathy.\textsuperscript{10} But when we connect Helga’s impenetrable moods with the novel’s variable weather it becomes possible to discern alternative forms of relation that move beyond the either/or choice of feeling \textit{with} Helga or feeling \textit{for} her. \textit{Quicksand}’s capricious moods and weather usher us into relation with uncertainty—the experience of drifting without the anchorage of a preconceived plan. In contemplating

\footnotesize{\begin{enumerate}
\item I borrow this organizing distinction from Arden Reed’s \textit{Romantic Weather} (8-9).
\item As Philip Fisher has outlined, there are two primary ways that literary texts solicit emotion from their readers. The familiar mode of “sympathy” prompts us to feel what the other is feeling, to reproduce a narratively represented emotional state. The second, less commonly invoked mode, which he calls “volunteered passion,” compels us to “feel something exactly because the other does not” (\textit{Vehement Passions} 142). This kind of identification requires that we fill in the blank ourselves “without a represented model for us to copy” (145).
\end{enumerate}}
“clouds and opaque airs,” Emerson writes, “I shall see and comprehend my relations” (EL 451). “The web of relation” that ties together person and event can therefore be described as “atmospheric”; as he advises, our “attitude of mind and reality of relation” should be carried “atmospherically” (EL 951, 520). For Emerson, the nature of atmospheric events cannot be determined in advance, but Quicksand shows how they can be overdetermined by fixed formulations of racialized and gendered identity.

I take a two-fold approach to reading Quicksand according to an Emersonian climatology of weather and moods. First, I examine how Larsen’s use of pathetic fallacy unsettles the novel at the level of plot and character. The literary device at first appears to help us read our illegible protagonist. The novel’s weather signs can be taken as an externalized phenomenology of otherwise impenetrable interior states. However, Quicksand’s primary meteorological referent—the clouds—prove as symbolically obscure as Helga’s moods. The vaporous phenomena that circulate through the novel’s pivotal scenes serve only to corroborate that Quicksand is patterned by inconsistency. I therefore track the appearance and dispersal of clouds at the novel’s crucial moments of transition, but in a second level of analysis I suggest that the scenes themselves are organized around the charged poles of cloud formation—the pressured dynamics of attraction and repulsion, condensation and precipitation. After examining how these exemplary episodes are patterned like the weather and by the weather, I close with a discussion of the incongruous ending that has baffled readers even more than Quicksand’s incomprehensible central character.

Larsen’s working title for her manuscript, Cloudy Amber, suggests one way of correlating the novel’s multiple material state changes within a framework of surprise.
Just as shifts in air pressure and temperature form clouds from condensation and amber from sap, Helga’s changes in mood and direction fluctuate between fluidity and fixity. I locate Larsen’s narrative surprise in the drifting clouds that model Helga’s mutability, but also in the novel’s sudden imposition of predetermined plot turns which underline the fossilizing narrative logic of race and reproduction. Larsen’s original title evidently references the intermediate color of Helga’s skin and the novel’s pervasive atmospheric imagery, but amber and clouds also offer more general emblems for transfiguring processes that are catalyzed by rising temperatures and pressures. Amber’s process of transformation—from liquid tree sap into solid resin and a final fossilized form—resembles the way that *Quicksand*'s fluidity of plot eventually congeals into rigid conventionality. Significantly, *cloudy* amber owes its opacity to trapped bubbles of air. Helga’s marked fascination with drifting clouds suggests that her own affective and imaginative idiom is primarily aerial. As Gaston Bachelard observes, “the imagination uses the cloud like an ectoplasm that sensitizes our mobility” (19).¹¹ This imaginative “ectoplasm” externalizes and materializes the atmospheric changes that spur Helga to flight. In *Quicksand*, clouds provide a model for a character, but also for a narrative, that might at any moment lapse into formless flux.

Just as a novel patterned around clouds eludes determinate definition, these mutable weather signs have long challenged philosophical and meteorological designation. For example, in Descartes’s *Discourse on Meteorology*, ungraspable mists, vapors, and exhalations skew the senses and confound judgment. A cloud’s suspension

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¹¹ The term ectoplasm was originally used by the French physiologist Charles Richet to denote a viscous or vaporous substance said to emanate from a spiritual medium in a trance state.
between form and formlessness seemed to pose a fundamental ontological problem that undermined the meteorological laws Descartes had worked to establish. A century and a half later, the meteorologist Luke Howard—sometimes simply referred to as “the namer of clouds”—responded to clouds’ amorphousness with a nomenclature (which we still use today) capable of denoting moment-by-moment modification. Fueled by ongoing processes of vaporous exchange, clouds, he discerned, might at any time pass into a new fleeting formation; the layered haze of stratus clouds could heap into cottony cumulus forms, or thin into wispy cirrus strands. Though their theories and approaches widely diverged, both Descartes and Howard sought a language that would register the infinitely variable processes of condensation and dispersal. In tracing the contours of a subject that fluctuates between congealed and dispersed forms, whose only constant is volatility, Larsen faces a similar set of challenges. The meteorological account of clouds as open forms offers a remarkably apt description of Helga Crane. Like the clouds she tracks across the sky, Helga is portrayed as “a series of self-canceling evanescences…a fugitive presence hastened to its onward dissolution” (Hamblyn 171). As the “fugitive” figure of the protagonist achieves her “onward dissolution” by elemental forces of attraction and repulsion, so too does Quicksand dissolve the series of plot conventions it invokes.

12 If you can philosophize about clouds, Descartes contends, then you can philosophize about anything else in the natural world. For a helpful discussion of Descartes’s Discourse on Meteorology, see Hamblyn’s The Invention of Clouds (esp. 40-43). See also Arsić’s discussion of Descartes and Melville in Passive Constitutions (158-64).

13 Howard is referred to by that moniker on the English Heritage plaque that marks the building where he died in Tottenham in 1846 at the age of ninety-one. <http://openplaques.org/plaques/190>

14 Howard first delivered his extraordinarily influential lecture “On the Modifications of Clouds,” in December of 1802. It was published in the science journal Philosophical Magazine in 1803. On the development of Howard’s cloud theory, see Hamblyn.
At each point of departure, Helga casts her gaze upon the firmament, as if its aspect will offer her guidance. As the train trundles her away from Naxos in the novel’s opening pages, she observes out the window that the early evening sky is streaked with “long, soft white clouds, clouds like shreds of incredibly fine cotton.” The banded clouds seem to run parallel to the tracks, mapping out a flight path to the city along the “flying landscape” of the sky (Q 22). When Helga arrives in Chicago, and soon after in Harlem, she is drawn by “an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd” (Q 30). Every time she steps out into “the glimmering…swarming” street, the “tremulous” clouds both mirror and appear to motivate her “aimless strolling” (Q 30, 32). At first, she emulates their floating waywardness, “drifting here and there with a sort of endless lack of purpose” (Q 30). But Helga’s initial sense of itinerant freedom in each city inevitably gives way to stifling claustrophobia. After her brief period of contented belonging a new weather front moves in marked by changes in temperature and season. It is only with Helga’s tempestuous departures that these mounting pressures finally break.

In its quotidian ordinariness, the weather can easily pass unnoticed as the prosaic ground against which the narrative action unfolds. When we bring Quicksand’s weather patterns to the fore, the novel’s apparently straightforward use of pathetic fallacy suggests that its meteorological signs can be taken as a sentient reflection of Helga’s

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15 Raymond Williams’s account of “structures of feeling” provides another suggestive framework for understanding how Helga suspends herself in an “intermediate zone of urban experience” in each new city. In his usage, “feelings” refer to a set of “formative processes”—fluctuating forms of experience that “escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known.” As Williams’s use of the term “structure” signals, these feelings are “never mere flux,” but are “formations on the very edge of semantic availability” (Marxism 134). In Quicksand, “feeling” takes the form of an unmediated visceral influx that suspends thought and spurs action. But as Williams helps us to see, at no point are those feelings formless.
otherwise indecipherable interior states. The literary device invites us to fill in her “blank spots” with reference to the skies. But as meteorologists and literary critics agree, the weather is hard to interpret. Despite the challenge, meteorology from Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* forward has been driven by the impulse to read the weather as a language. A recent study of Howard and clouds establishes this long-standing link between words and weather:

> [Meteorology] is a search for narrative order among events governed not by laws alone but by the shapeless caprices of the atmosphere. Weather writes, erases, and rewrites itself upon the sky with the endless fluidity of language; and it is with language that we have sought throughout history to apprehend it. Since the sky has always been more read than measured, it has always been the province of words. (Hamblyn 16-17)

While we may be compelled to compare the weather with semantic signs, its script is not readily legible. Perhaps more than any other aerial phenomena, clouds exemplify the interpretive difficulties posed by sky-writing that morphs as soon as its marks are made. Rather than helping us to penetrate Helga’s opacity, the clouds we are given only intensify her inscrutability. As an author of the first *International Cloud Atlas* (1896) affirmed, “clouds always tell a true story, but one which is difficult to read” (Abercromby 145).\(^{16}\) The *Cloud Atlas* addressed this difficulty by pairing Howard’s nomenclature with referential photographs; the burgeoning field of modern meteorology deemed it necessary to supplement semantic descriptions with visual aids. By contrast, *Quicksand* provides

\(^{16}\) Richard Abercromby’s “On the Identity of Cloud Forms All Over the World” was published in the *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society* in 1887. The *Cloud Atlas* that Abercromby contributed to remains the basis of our modern understanding of clouds.
neither an illustrative key for reading the clouds nor a psychological code for cracking Helga’s moods.

Though the novel’s instances of pathetic fallacy further obscure instead of clarify, the novel’s engagement with literary convention points us towards a climatology that has variability at its core. Emerson’s career-long commitment to tracing temperamental moods and weather suggests powerful continuities between internal and external registers of atmospheric change. However, Emerson scholars have generally treated these phenomena separately. For example, Eduardo Cadava’s *Emerson and the Climates of History* demonstrates how Emerson’s climatic figures shape his discourses of war, race, and slavery. As Sharon Cameron’s work on “Emerson’s Impersonal” demonstrates, his emphasis on the transience of moods erodes the commonplace idea that mental states are personal and reside “within.” While these critics have powerfully elucidated Emerson’s models of historical flux and unbounded selfhood, surprisingly little work has explored how Emerson’s epistemologies of weather and moods inflect each other.\(^\text{17}\) An exemplary passage of the essay “Experience” underscores the intimate connection between the fluctuation of moods and the “circulation” of celestial bodies, suggesting generative inroads for reading Emerson and Larsen together:

The secret of the illusoriness [of life] is in the necessity of the succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This

\(^{17}\) An important exception is Arsić’s *On Leaving*. She describes the conjoining of Emersonian moods and the weather this way: “[Emerson’s] moods and perceptions inhabit us as so many atmospheric events…as if coming to us from outside, registering changes in the weather” (145). My understanding of *Quicksand* as a series of “atmospheric events” is indebted to her reading of Emerson.
onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*. When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. (*EL* 476)

Looking to the sky, Emerson aligns the successiveness of moods with the onwardness of nature. The strength and necessity of these forces overtake us from within and without. Our impulse, he suggests, is to anchor the self, but when we seek stationary “permanence,” we find that the grounds of selfhood are “quicksand.” The self is groundless because our moods are no more intrinsic to us than the heavenly orbs passing overhead. In this passage, it is the moon and stars that hurry across the sky, but more often, Emerson watches clouds sweep across the “overarching vault” (*EL* 337).

“Our moods do not believe in each other,” writes Emerson (*EL* 406). Larsen’s heroine bears him out. The anchorless Helga Crane moves like the emblematic bird of “Experience,” “which alights nowhere, but hops perpetually from bough to bough,” or in her case, from continent to continent (*EL* 477). We might also recall the comparison William James draws between the ever-moving stream of consciousness and “a bird’s life…made of an alternation of flights and perchings.” He observes that “the rhythm of language” expresses our continual vacillation between “subjective states” by alternating between “transitive parts” and “substantive parts” or “resting places.” According to James, as soon as we try to follow those transitive “flights to a conclusion,” we risk “annihilating them”; the “stability” of the substantive “quite eclipses and swallows them up” (*PP* 243-44). In *Quicksand*, this oscillation between transitive and substantive parts of speech moves in tandem with Helga’s fluctuation between grammatical (or

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18 See Stanley Cavell’s powerful reading of this passage in “Thinking of Emerson” from *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (esp. 12-13).
19 For a sampling of Emerson’s cloud references in *Essays and Lectures*, see pages 15, 206, 242, 245, 305, 331, 451, 484, 553, 974.
morphological) moods. Her transitivity is driven by the “optative mood” (closely related to the subjunctive), which indicates a wish or hope—the mood of potentiality that Emerson associates with America’s literary and spiritual yearnings. To put it in the terms of the weather, those optative longings pressurize internal and external atmospheres. When rising pressures reach their culminating apex, Helga finds release in precipitated travel. Upon arrival, she moves into the indicative, making definitive declarations of “security and permanence in her new life” (Q 77). Two conflicting imperatives propel and arrest Helga’s flights: on the one hand, the urge to uproot herself from any defining categories of identity or place, and the desire, on the other, to claim a grounded sense of self and home.

When Helga first arrives in Harlem from Naxos, then Chicago, she “seem[s] at last to belong somewhere” (Q 44). But “as the days became hotter and the streets more swarming,” her “happiness” is subsumed by a “restlessness”:

her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definitive examination became almost intolerable…She felt shut in, trapped…All interest had gone out of living…for some unknown reason, it was of herself she was afraid. (Q 47)

With these changes in mood and temperature, the “crowds of nameless folk” that had earlier offered freedom and belonging, now “encompassed her” with a sense of “estrangement and isolation” (Q 47-48). The bodily “repulsion” and “aversion” she feels in the street only intensifies “with the waning of summer…swallowing up all else like some dense fog” (Q 48, 53). Just at the point when Helga is sure that the thick miasma of

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20 Emerson writes, “our American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood” (EL 199).
“excruciating agony” will never lift, an escape route presents itself in the form of a five thousand dollar inheritance and an invitation to Copenhagen from her Scandinavian aunt.

At this transitional moment, Helga sets out on a “sulky, humid…thick furry night” (Q 48-49, 53). It is “an atrocious night for cabareting,” she reflects as she is dragged into a Harlem jazz bar. She is immediately engulfed by the sensorial overwhelm of the club: “A glare of light struck her eyes, a blare of jazz split her ears. For a moment everything seemed to be spinning around,” but as Helga “grew accustomed to the smoke and din,” she becomes absorbed within the room’s “moving mosaic” (Q 60):

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. (Q 59)

How are we to reconcile the ecstasy and essentialism that converge in this moment? The surprise of the scene is in its disconcerting collision of moving sensation and hardened cultural stereotypes. The strange episode is marked out by a shift in narrative time and voice. “For a while,” onward momentum is suspended by an alternate temporal order. The narrative perspective vacillates between intimate proximity and detached distance, fissuring the novel’s otherwise relatively seamless free indirect discourse. Set apart from what has come before, the scene requires the reader’s reoriented attention. Indeed, a great
deal of critical attention has been paid to the episode, but divergent readings suggest that its conflicting pressures of fluidity and fixity cannot easily be reconciled.

Flitting in and out of bodily consciousness, Helga glimpses her medial relation to a world from which she has felt estranged. But this immediacy of relation is mediated by racialized constructions of a primal “jungle” whirl. As the jazz rhythms blow, beat, and rip at the bounds of selfhood, she is carried on an intoxicating wave of oblivion that promises bodily release and psychic expansion. Helga’s identity-obliterating immersion in a sensory stream resembles William James’s account of “pure experience,” but here any “purity” of ecstatic experience is at once mixed with the clichés of thumping tomchts and gyrating flesh (Q 62, Esteve 274). The trope of losing oneself in the crowd or dissolving into the stream of experience becomes very differently charged in a context where racism has inflicted compulsory rather than elective forms of anonymity. In a study of crowds and the Harlem Renaissance, Mary Esteve reminds us that “sociopolitically disenfranchised blacks in the US have historically been consigned to a multitude, a race, prior to, if not instead of, a self” (270). In this scene, Helga oscillates between equally alienated states—an isolated sense of being “singularly apart from it all,” and a stigmatized sense of deindividuation by the racialized multitude (Q 58). In Helga’s experience of the Harlem cabaret, the sensual pleasures of ecstatic self-disappearance are inextricable from the violence of stigmatizing cultural essentialism.

The experience of being “born with a veil,” as W.E.B. Du Bois describes it, is a central theme of twentieth-century African-American literature (45). The destructive anonymity negotiated by James Weldon Johnson’s autobiographical “Ex-Colored Man” or Ralph Ellison’s unnamed “Invisible Man,” for example, is clearly of a different order
than the invisibility that Benjamin’s *flâneur* actively cultivates. Esteve argues in relation to these texts and others that the primary literary strategy of opposing enforced anonymity is the cultivation of self-consciousness (284n.2). As soon as Helga begins to lose herself in the music (a transfigurative medium in each of the transitional scenes) she becomes acutely aware of having been invaded by the racial constructs she associates with its “savage strains”: “She dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her” (*Q* 59). With a deliberate exercise of will, Helga extracts herself from the sensorial absorption that has engulfed her. She is returned to her senses, as it were, but her heightened perceptual awareness turns against itself. When the surprise of self-disappearance couples with shame in this way, self-consciousness becomes coterminous with self-contempt, limiting its potential as a “strategy of opposing compulsory anonymity” (Esteve 284n.2).

In this regard, we might recall Du Bois’s famous assertion that the black man in America is denied any “true self-consciousness” by the experience of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (45). This doubled self-perception results in “two unreconciled strivings,” “two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 45). Du Bois’s “double consciousness” suggests an internally divided body and self yet, a half century later, Franz Fanon’s account of “third person consciousness” elaborates that decoupling of a person from himself in phenomenological and grammatical terms that go further to explain the cabaret scene’s atmospheric pressures. For Fanon, an embodied sense of self is constructed “in the middle of a spatial and temporal world,” out of “a real dialectic
between my body and the world” (110). But, as he explains, “in the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema”: “the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of uncertainty” (111). “For a while,” Helga allows herself to inhabit and be inhabited by an immersive unknown that might enable rather than negate expansive experience. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the experience of being outside ourselves in an “intercorporeal” world is one of risky exposure, but also generative possibility.21 It is only by opening ourselves to atmospheric uncertainty that we “acquire a social horizon”—one that allows us to come into relation with people and temporalities “outside [our] living experience” (Merleau-Ponty 433).22 Fanon attends to the social forces that contract the horizon. Suspended in uncertainty, a racialized consciousness is easily infiltrated by alienating images of aberrant inferiority. As a result, the founding self-relation is permeated by “shame and self-contempt” (Fanon 116). When the openness of surprise is overwhelmed by shame, guilt, and nausea, any potential aperture is felt as an open wound. Every time Larsen’s protagonist faces the fresh horizon of a new beginning, promising prospects are rapidly constricted by the sutures she has tried to stitch around the “obscene sore” that throbs at the core of her being (Q 29).

According to Fanon, the “atmosphere of uncertainty” that permeates a third-person consciousness is grammatically expressed in the gap between the first-person “I” and an objectivized “he” or “she” (110). Casting such an objectivizing gaze back on

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21 Merleau-Ponty uses the term “intercorporeality” to describe the embodied, interdependent connection we involuntarily share with other bodies and things in the world.

22 Here, I owe a debt to Posnock’s discussion of Fanon and Du Bois in “How It Feels to Be a Problem.” Laura Doyle’s “Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism” draws important connections between these thinkers and Merleau-Ponty, which have also informed my thinking.
himself, Fanon finds that he has assimilated an array of stultifying stereotypes, which are remarkably resonant with the terms that Helga uses to characterize her cabaret experience: “I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-­ships” (112). As indicated, *Quicksand*’s otherwise relatively unobtrusive free indirect style suddenly makes itself felt in the above scene. Throughout this episode, the third person narrator’s fluctuating perspective is as hard to pin down as the moods that successively overtake Helga’s third person consciousness. As she is subsumed into the music’s momentum, the narrative focalization appears intimately fused with her own. The dynamic series of active verbs surge in unison with the jazz that moves Helga; for both the narrator and the protagonist, all is “bodily motion” (*Q* 59). Laura Doyle posits that this is “the only moment in the narrative when Helga and her narrator shed their vexed sense of double-consciousness” (*Freedom’s Empire* 401). And yet, any ecstatic cohesion is riven with the disturbing primitivism that permeates the scene. Just as the protagonist is swept into the “swirling mass,” the sinuous sentences threaten to sweep readers into implicated relation with racist stereotypes (*Q* 59). Laced with clichés of jungle savagery, these formulations have an insidious potential for contagion that feels all the more dangerous because of the uncertain proximity between the narrator and character. Without clear narrative footholds, the reader potentially partakes of Helga’s dislocated ambivalence. For the reader, as for the protagonist, anxious unease permeates the division between “me” and “not me.”

Dragging herself out of the fray, Helga admonishes her own implication in the “semi-barbaric” scene: “She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature” (*Q* 59). But
instead of rejecting wholesale these primitivizing tropes, Helga defensively “cloak[s] herself in faint disgust” and turns an exoticizing mode of spectatorship back onto “this oppressed race of hers” (Q 59). While the club’s “fantastic motley” will remain “in the heart of the jungle,” she insists she will escape (Q 59, 62). Helga’s stereotyping projections point to the “absolute density” of a racialized consciousness that has been saturated with oppressive racial constructions (Fanon 135). Charged with these troubling tropes, the atmospheric exchanges between Helga’s moods and her ambient surroundings feel stiflingly airless. Following her dizzying swing from ecstatic oblivion to self-flagellation, Helga aims to cover her bared shame with “aloof” and “contemptuous” disinterest (Q 60). But rather than achieving detached neutrality, her vertiginous seesaw between attraction and repulsion cathects around the mysterious figure of Audrey Denney, “the beautiful, calm, cool, girl, who had the assurance, the courage [to] so placidly ignore racial barriers” (Q 62). Denney gives herself over to the music with all the “abandon” and “obvious pleasure” that Helga only fleetingly glimpses. As she watches the woman’s mesmerizing movements, Helga’s “envious admiration…was augmented by another, a more primitive emotion” that leaves her “heart throbbing…panting, confused.” Suddenly desperate to escape the charged room, she staggers back into the sweltering night. Helga is left at the end of the chapter in a broken heap, “a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying black and gold dress…unhappy, misunderstood, and forlorn” (Q 62). In disavowing the primal sexuality she associates with jazz, Helga also rejects all of Harlem. Shame “harden[s] her determination to get away” to the non-racialized utopia she projects onto Denmark (Q 59). At the opening of the next chapter, she has already set sail.
The jazz club episode exemplifies the patterned shifts in narrative perspective that dissolve and congeal the protagonist’s materiality in each of the novel’s transitional scenes. As atmospheric pressures build, Helga’s affective and sensorial experience of her internal and external world becomes intensely concentrated. Her every fluctuation of feeling is held in claustrophobic close-up. But in the moment of departure, the charge is released, ushering in a low-pressure weather system that disperses the discomfiting contiguities exemplified by the cabaret episode. These shifts from high- to low-pressure zones are marked by shifts in focalization. The narrative perspective pulls back so that Helga floats at a distance, a barely materialized presence in the cinematic scope of the new scene. As the liner pulls away from the “cliff-like towers” of New York “into the open sea,” she leaves behind the “torrid summer [that] had so oppressed her” (Q 63). Stretching before her is “the serene calm of the lingering September summer, under whose sky the sea was smooth like a length of watered silk, unruffled by the stir of any wind…she revel[ed] like a released bird in her returned feeling of happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself and not to a race” (Q 65). Facing this open expanse, she announces, “It had begun, a new life for Helga Crane” (Q 66).

Shortly thereafter, the cycle is again underway. Helga is once more overtaken by “an indefinite discontent…like a storm gathering far on the horizon”—a storm that breaks on another night of acute shame (Q 81). But whereas the experience of self-loss in the jazz club provokes her disidentification from the black community of Harlem, the spectacle of minstrel performers playing ragtime in a Scandinavian Circus prompts an identificatory journey of return. Helga’s projection of a post-racial utopia in Copenhagen is shattered all at once by the “gesticulating black figures” and the “delight” and “avidity”
with which the audience “drank [it] in” (Q 82):

she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget… (Q 83)

Helga feels shamed by the vaudeville performance because she senses that “some characteristic, different from any that they [the Danes] themselves possessed,” has suddenly been put on display for all to see (Q 83). Her internalization of America’s color line, drawn as deeply in Harlem as in Naxos, is only exacerbated by her status as an exotic rarity in Copenhagen. Though the Danes hold her racial difference as a “precious thing…to be enhanced, preserved” and “admired” rather than “despised,” that difference is nonetheless deemed essential and irreducible (Q 83). The shame she feels before the minstrel performers betrays the extent to which this noxious racial thinking has become her own. The vaudeville show leaves Helga “profoundly disquieted” and heralds atmospheric disturbances to her “transformed existence” in Denmark: “Her old unhappy questioning mood came again upon her…a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings” (Q 84).

*Quicksand*’s high-pressure scenes draw on racialized clichés—of jungle animality, cavorting ragtime minstrels, and in the concluding sequence, the tragic mulatta’s fall and religious revival. In each case, the over-familiarity of these shame-inducing tropes seems at first to be inimical to surprise. However, the episodes’ framing in the terms of “aversion” offers an important clue for how such hackneyed tropes can open up rather than foreclose new possibilities for reading (Q 48 and 63). According to
Cavell, Emersonian aversion is a gesture of turning against “ourselves in our conformity” (*Etudes* 165). The aversive turn against unquestioned orthodoxies fosters “a self-consciousness” that “expresses itself as shame” (*Etudes* 155). In the face of conformist convention, shame is for Emerson “the condition under which anything new can be said” (*Etudes* 121). But as Fanon has shown, racialized shame turns self-consciousness into paralyzing self-contempt that drastically constricts the field of expressive possibility. As Helga’s responses to the jazz club and the vaudeville show make clear, those aversive feelings instigate an oppositional turn away, but also a fascinated turn towards the object of aversion. After her first visit to the Circus, Helga “returned again and again,” compelled and repelled by the spectacle on stage (*Q* 83). In each pivotal episode of *Quicksand*, Larsen stages the event of surprise as a “suspensive conflict” between conformity and nonconformity with the narrative logic of race (*Q* 83).

In taking leave of anchored selfhood, Helga in effect answers Mikhail Bakhtin’s call for “unfinalizability” and “surprisingness” in novelistic representations of character (*Problems* 59). These narrative principles stave off the deadening determinism he identifies as the primary problem with the novel form. In both the cabaret and circus scenes, Helga meets Bakhtin’s mandate that characters must “render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition” of them. According to Bakhtin, surprise is intrinsic to life, and should be to the novel, because “a man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity A=A” (*Problems* 59). In Helga’s case, however, such surprising non-coincidence is constantly threatened by essentializing

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23 Cavell is meditating on the following lines from “Self-Reliance”: “The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (*EL* 261).
24 My reading of Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* has been greatly enriched by Gary Morson’s commentary in *Narrative and Freedom*. 
formulas of racial identity that demand fixed self-sameness.

With an “unfinalizable” protagonist driving the narrative action, *Quicksand*’s plot deviates from linear causality. Her final embrace of marriage is disconcerting precisely because, up to this point, her peripatetic path has evaded romantic overtures. For example, immediately following the Copenhagen Circus scene, Helga refuses a marriage that she had previously yearned for. She receives the unexpected proposal from a famous Danish artist who has hitherto treated her with ambivalence. The scene unfolds as a contest of competing understandings of what it means to feel and to express surprise. The scene opens abruptly: “Axel Olsen asked her to marry him. And now Helga Crane was surprised” (*Q* 84). She is taken aback by the sudden arrival of an event that she had “much wanted,” but “had relinquished as impossible of achievement” (*Q* 84). Each time Helga reiterates her surprise (three times to herself and twice more out loud to Olsen), she marks the distance between the self that had longed for this moment and the self that now inhabits it. Whereas she was once consumed by the “intangible” feeling that “her origin a little repelled him,” she now turns Olsen’s “racial antagonism” and “repugnance” back upon him (*Q* 84, 85).

When Helga reports to Olsen that “his offer was…unexpected,” the artist’s response is sardonic and leaves her with “a stripped, naked feeling”: “But of course I expected surprise. It is, is it not, the proper thing? And always you are proper, Frokken Helga, always” (*Q* 85, 86). Her insistent reiteration that “she was surprised” asserts a fundamental difference in their respective understandings of the feeling. For Helga, surprise marks her encounter with non-coincident selves who desire disparate futures. By contrast, Olsen’s suggestion that Helga’s expression of surprise is a feigned show of
modesty indicates that he understands the emotion to belong to the realm of contrived social decorum. When he declines to believe that Helga “was being quite sincere, quite truthful,” her repudiation ensures that he feels the proximity of surprise to the self as sharply as she does (Q 86). Her refusal of marriage controverts Olsen’s allegation that she has “the soul of a prostitute” and can be bought by “the highest bidder”:

“But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t at all care to be owned. Even by you…You see, I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you, not just personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial. Some day you’ll be glad. We can’t tell, you know; if we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that.” (Q 87-88)

Helga’s unanticipated missive hits home with all its intended force. Olsen can only look at her with “the surprised stare of a puzzled baby” (Q 87). Helga’s rejection shatters Olsen’s assurance of acceptance, but also derailed any expectation that the Copenhagen courtship will resolve itself into a conventional marriage plot and bring her transatlantic seeking to an end. Olsen’s parting words frame his disappointment in generic terms. According to his account, their story ends in “tragedy” rather than in happy nuptials because of Helga’s compromised moral character. He indicts her with the assessment that his primitivizing portrait “is, after all, the true Helga Crane” (Q 88-89). Helga denounces the “disgusting sensual creature” in the picture as vehemently as she disavowed the glimpse of herself as “a jungle creature” in the Harlem jazz club (Q 89). But even as she violently denies any likeness between herself and these images of primal sexuality, “race and shame” remain toxically coupled for Helga (Q 88).
The shame Helga feels in the cabaret, at the vaudeville Circus, and here, in front of Olsen’s painting, is paralyzing and mobilizing in equal measure. On the one hand, she decisively denounces Olsen’s misogynist racism. Her multiple expressions of surprise reject his claim that she is always “proper” in several senses of the word. She spurns his idea of social decorum and his conception of persons as purchasable property. In this sense, Helga embraces what Emerson describes as “the way of life...by abandonment,” which begins when we allow ourselves “to be surprised out of our propriety.” Only when we have abandoned conformity with convention and shed the sense of a “proper” self can we “draw a new circle” (EL 414). And yet, even as she abandons Olsen and Copenhagen, Helga has already incorporated the painter’s belief that she is defined by those racial characteristics he deems “proper” to her. These internalized constructs finally restrict the newness of the circle she is capable of drawing. Helga has already summed up her irresolvable double bind at the novel’s outset: “She could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity” (Q 7). Just as opposition and acquiescence comingle in Helga’s stance towards racial essentialism, Quicksand’s final sequence enmeshes the conventional and atypical at the level of plot. The capitulating forms of closure feel strangely dissonant because they diverge from the novel’s unconventional itinerary up to that point. In the novel’s apparently incongruous concluding pages, the protagonist’s aversive turns upon herself converge with the novel’s aversive relationship to plot.

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Having left America to escape a racialized sense of self, Helga frames her return as a “surrender to the irresistible ties of race” (Q 92). In the same way that Denmark failed to offer any post-racial utopia, her romanticized ideals of racial reconnection and belonging in Harlem are soon disillusioned. Upon arrival in New York, Helga attends a
party where she unexpectedly encounters two men who represent the life she fled at Naxos. With a “stab of surprise,” she first spots her ex-fiancé ($Q_{100}$). James Vayle’s appearance reminds us that the novel opened with her rejection of the normative stability promised by marriage into a “first family” where “it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable” ($Q_{8}$). Such an arrangement would require that she pair the “veil” she was born under with another self-effacing “Vayle.” Their encounter only reaffirms her initial decision but Helga’s reunion with the director of Naxos is a great deal more charged. Since her flight from the institution, the figure of Dr. Robert Anderson had “obtruded itself with surprising vividness” at unforeseen moments. The last time it had “surprisingly risen” was at the jazz club, where Anderson danced with Denney ($Q_{64}$). Though he is newly married, she now finds herself caught in a stolen embrace with him in the apartment hallway. Helga fends off a marriage plot with Olsen only to have the “ecstasy” of Anderson’s embrace trigger an equally familiar plotline. From the moment she swoons in his arms, the rhetoric of fallenness infiltrates the narrative with “the suddenness of a dream” ($Q_{105}, 104$). For a time, then, her “irrepressible longing”—elsewhere described as a “strange ill-defined emotion, a vague yearning rising within her”—finds a clear object ($Q_{106}, 50$). But in her final encounter with Anderson, as with Olsen, incongruent forms of surprise leave her in a shamed state of “exposure” ($Q_{107}$). While Helga anticipates the “consummation” of reciprocal desire, she is met only with his regretful contrition, followed by his “surprised” relief that she is not angry ($Q_{107}$). Her “mortification” and “self-loathing” are felt all the more sharply.

$^{25}$ Significantly, both of these surprise encounters interrupt Helga’s trajectory towards Audrey Denney, whom she has spotted at the party and has longed to meet since she watched her dance at the Harlem jazz club.
because “she had deluded herself” into expecting mutuality: “The wish to give herself had been so intense that Dr. Anderson’s surprising, trivial apology loomed as a direct refusal of the offering” (Q 109). When Helga finds her “voluptuous visions” unshared, she laments that she has “ruined everything” (Q 109, 108). Without reciprocity, she recasts the once hopeful future as “an endless stretch of dreary years” (Q 108).

Helga’s conviction that she has been doomed to a dismal destiny is almost immediately corroborated by the weather. The ominous darkening of the clouds and eventual downpour externalizes the deluge of despair she feels. In his study of narrative time, Gary Morson singles out the “gathering storm” as a primary emblem of foreshadowing—a shadow cast by a pending “reversal of fortune” on the narrative horizon (47-48). Whereas Quicksand’s clouds have hitherto indicated an open, amorphous temporal order, here their gathering heralds the closed inevitability of predestination. In this way, Helga is subjected to the predetermined plots that she had previously outstripped. “Alone, isolated from all other humans, separated even from her own anterior existence,” she gives herself over to the elemental forces of the storm (Q 109):

Helga Crane, walking rapidly, aimlessly, could decide on no definite destination… Rain and wind whipped cruelly about her, drenching her garments and chilling her body… A sudden more ruthless gust of wind ripped the small hat from her head. In the next minute the black clouds opened wider and spilled their

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26 As Morson explains, foreshadowing depends on an asymmetry between the knowledge of the character and the recognizant “reader of fiction,” but also between the protagonist and author: “it is the fact that the story is already written and the structure already determined that makes such a sign possible, and so foreshadowing is an infallible remainder of the author’s essential surplus. It establishes the merely illusory nature of what the character experiences as open temporality” (48).
water with unusual fury. The streets became swirling rivers...she began
desperately to struggle through wind and rain toward one of the buildings, where
she could take shelter in a store or a doorway. But another whirl of wind lashed
her and, scornful of her slight strength, tossed her into the swollen gutter. (Q 110)

Seeking refuge, Helga is washed up on the threshold of a revival storefront church. As
the choir within repeats a refrain from Ezekiel—“...Showers of blessings, / Showers of
blessings...”—Helga is struck by the absurd “appropriateness of the song” (Q 111). Her
wild laughter gradually turns to weeping as the hymn connects the falling showers with
the relinquishment of self. Helga is “penetrated” by the charismatic Gospel choir’s
singing in the same way she was overcome by the Harlem jazz, but here her orgiastic
self-disappearance spurs a conversionary return to race rather than its rejection. The
bellowing wind and “the wailing singing” merge with Helga’s weeping as the chorus
progresses from “All of self, and none of Thee,” to “Some of self, and some of Thee,” to
“Less of self, and more of Thee” (Q 111-12). Her deafening yells for mercy and “torrents
of tears” “drown every other clamor,” so that the hymn’s final verse, which declares the
sinner a conquered suppliant—“None of self, and all of Thee”—is not articulated but
only enacted by Helga’s prostrate body (Feminist Difference 48).

Helga retreats from the flash of ecstatic oblivion she feels at the jazz club, but
now she gives herself wholly over to the “wild, ecstatic fury” she finds within the church
walls, welcoming the sexually and racially coded identifications with the music:
“Gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound
in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal
desire to shout and sling herself about” (Q 112, 113). When “arms were stretched toward
her with savage frenzy,” she allows herself to be embraced as an “errin’ sistah” and a “pore los’ sinner” (Q 112). In the charged moments before “the thing became real,” the poles of ruination and redemption become indistinguishable. As the bellowing wind and the wailing singing interpenetrate, the storm inside and outside converge in “a thunder-clap of joy” at the moment “she was lost—or saved” (Q 114).

Suspending her protagonist between ruin and salvation, Larsen self-consciously engages with the figure of the tragic mulatta—a special case of the “fallen woman” whose mixed blood dictates her compromised entry into the world. The obstacles presented by this figure’s inauspicious birth are very often compounded by her experience of being orphaned, isolated, and variously abandoned.27 From the outset, Larsen invokes the conventions of a tragic mulatta narrative only to turn them back on themselves, wholly inverting the expectations they raise. Helga’s “painful isolation” is the product of her West Indian father’s desertion and her Danish mother’s death, but for the majority of the novel she assumes the role of abandoner, taking sudden leave of each person who tries in vain to embrace her (Q 24). She suffers the psychic dislocation of feeling “neither black nor white and yet both,” to borrow Werner Sollors’s phrase; but while this in-between status is a constant source of unease, Larsen refuses to collapse the horizontal logic of crossing into the vertical axis of fallenness.28 In calling Helga a “Jezebel,” the parishioners echo Olsen’s assessment that she “has the soul of a prostitute,” but like the Dane they have mistaken her for a “scarlet ‘oman” (Q 112, 87,

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27 In Tainted Souls and Painted Faces, Amanda Anderson explores the literary theme of fallenness as a preoccupation with what she calls “attenuated agency.” She argues that commentators attribute to the fallen woman only “the minimal and paradoxical freedom of knowing that she cannot alter her character, for it is no longer her own” (57).
28 See Sollors’s Neither Black Nor White and Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature.
When Helga declares that everything is “ruined,” she refers to the failure of desired mutuality rather than sexual ruination (Q 108). In Anderson, she sought a reciprocity that is the very opposite of the economic transaction Olsen proposed. Having given herself over to the Baptists’ definitions of sin and deliverance, she tacitly accepts the congregation’s judgment. But a closer examination of the way Larsen frames the climactic conversion reveals that Helga’s sudden turn towards religion and the South is no less aversive than the transatlantic turns that have preceded. Indeed, “aversion” and “conversion” share a common etymological root in the verb “to turn.” As the scene proceeds, a turn towards and a turn away become recognizable as one and the same gesture.

The gathering storm marks the novel’s move into a formal register of surprise that has the potential to implicate the reader in the kind of “aversive thinking” Helga has modeled. In Cavell’s definition, this oppositional mode of thought is guided by “the imperative to an incessant conversion or refiguration of society’s incessant demands for [our] consent—[our] conforming [our]self—to its doings” (Etudes 145). Having followed Helga’s aversive turns up to this point we have learned, paradoxically, to expect unconventionality. As a result, the reasserted tropes of fallenness, religious revival, domesticating nuptials, and a return to Southern roots, feel strangely misplaced. Thus far, Larsen has twisted readily recognizable plots into unfamiliar forms, but in the concluding pages, the final plot twist is that narrative closure comes to us straight. This apparent capitulation to convention also signals Helga’s submission to those regulatory sexual norms she had relentlessly evaded up to that point. For many readers, the church

29 As Posnock puts it, “the ties of race ensnare the nearly illegible Helga in the plainly readable plot of return” (Color & Culture 80).
scene constitutes a rupturing break with what came before. As Esteve attests, “in the final episodes all bets are off. Reader and writer have been abandoned to the cause of narratological causelessness” (279). In my reading, the storm that ushers Helga into the church also ushers in a new narrative order, but one that exists in generatively dialectical relation with what has come before. Reframed as an atmospheric event, the apparent “causelessness” of this concluding sequence supplies a fitting culmination with important narrative effects.

To read *Quicksand’s* final plot turns as structured by surprise and congruent with the novelistic project as a whole, it is helpful to bear in mind the way that an Emersonian conception of surprise vitally inflected William James’s pragmatism. For James, the decision to embrace an open-ended universe that is “still in the making” differentiates the pragmatist world-view from the determinist’s “ready-made” reality (*WII* 599). For our actions to have genuine consequences, James insists we must suspend ourselves in a pluralistic universe of chance where their impact cannot be known in advance. The novel’s climactic storm stages a confrontation between these two competing world-views: determinism and indeterminism collide in a shared symbolic landscape. On the one hand, the scene indexes the inexorable forces that overpower Helga’s “slight strength” (*Q* 110). From this perspective, the storm is a closed system that drives her towards a predetermined end. At the same time, James’s principal metaphor of indeterminism—the swirling stream of experience—is literalized in the flooded streets. However, James’s celebration of flux appears conclusively cancelled out when the torrent sweeps Helga into the gutter where she calls to mind a clichéd archetype of the fallen woman.
The final pile-up of predictable plots would seem to confirm that Helga has become a plaything of fatalistic forces rather than the agent of her own actions. Indeed, that is how most commentators have interpreted *Quicksand*’s ending. But several factors complicate a straightforwardly deterministic reading. From the outset, the very hyperbole of Larsen’s final invocation of pathetic fallacy tonally shifts the scene from the pathos of tragic fate into a bathetic parody of its fatalism. Further, just when Helga’s agency seems entirely obliterated at the storm’s climax, she makes a pragmatic decision: “Now she knew beyond all doubt that that she had no desire to die, and certainly not there nor then…Death had lost all of its picturesque aspects to the girl soaked and soiled in the flooded gutter” (*Q* 110). In this moment, she decides to live rather than to die the prototypical death of “ruined” despair. The pragmatic method of measured deliberation between world-views can make it easy to forget that William James’s own decision to believe that life is worth living, staked against a long depressive struggle, is a moment that crucially contributes to the founding of pragmatism. For James, our ability to choose life over death confirms that we live in an indeterminate world where we will be faced with what he describes in *The Will to Believe* as a “genuine option”—a momentous choice that can’t be decided on detached, dispassionate grounds (*WI* 458). *Quicksand* confronts us with the constraints that condition such a choice and its life-and-death

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30 My thinking has been shaped here by Isabelle Stengers’s discussion of William James’s pragmatic investment in “choices which engage and expose” in “William James: An Ethics of Thought?” (9). Stengers argues that “James writes ‘before’ the suicidal, before those who succumbed, whereas he had a second chance” (12). A pragmatic ethics of thinking, according to Stengers, treats every thought as “an affirmation that there is something to think and that it can be thought” (12). To think is thus to affirm that “‘life is worth living,’ to decide to live against the real possibility of suicide” (11). Stengers defines pragmatism as “a thinking that accepts as a constraint the exclusion of every idea that implies, amongst its consequences, a transmutation of our reasons into *Reason*, into what should have been valid also for those who disregarded it and chose not to live” (19).
consequences. James urged the audience of east coast academics who attended his pragmatism lectures to open themselves to “a tramp and vagrant world” (WII 601). What Larsen describes as Helga’s “vagrant primitive groping” involves a different order of exposure (Q 95). Whereas James’s figurative phrase serves a rhetorical purpose in his philosophical call-to-arms, Helga struggles throughout the novel to hold literal vagrancy at bay.31

Helga’s determination to live in the face of death directly feeds her decision to believe in “some One, some Power, who was interested in her. Would help her.” The conversionary moment of religious ecstasy exceeds deliberation but in its wake Helga resolves “for once in her life to be practical.” She describes her conversion in the terms of exchange, cost, and use value. “Her resolution” to believe in a higher power is pragmatic to the extent that she asks what difference it would make to her daily existence. She finds that the “chance at stability, at permanent happiness” is “worth the risk” (Q 116-17). But where James chooses to believe in “a pluralistic, restless universe,” Helga determines that this lone “chance at stability” is her last chance at living (WI 589). With one last glance at “the wind scattering the gray-white clouds”—the novel’s emblem of endless drift—she resolves “to retain, to bear this happiness at such a cost as she must pay for it” (Q 116).32

31 In this respect, Helga’s itinerant wanderings are also strategic.
32 Helga’s final glance at the clouds before marrying the Reverend assumes particular significance when considered in light of Emerson’s claim that marriage only avoids stultification when we allow our “warm loves and fears” to sweep across the “overarching vault” of the mind like “clouds” (EL 337). When “a man and a woman, so variously and correlatively gifted, are shut up in one house to spend in the nuptial society forty or fifty years” with only institutional conventions as their guide, each partner begins to appropriate the other into a rigid mold. When we fail to recognize that our selves and our “circumstances vary every hour,” our spouse’s “incongruities” are felt as disproportionate “defects” (EL 336). In this scenario, according to Emerson, the “surprise” of the non-coincedent other becomes a source of endless “crisis” rather than
The cost Helga pays is her relinquished commitment to an open-ended universe. She trades precarity for predictability—what she calls the “anaesthetic satisfaction” of a life-plan that is finished, closed, already written (Q 118).\(^{33}\)

Helga’s decision to convert, and the following day, to marry the Reverend Pleasant Green and return to the rural South, is a pragmatic choice, but also an aversive one. The novel opens with Helga’s catalyzing decision to break off her engagement and to cut all ties with the South. But her sudden repudiation of a Bible Belt marriage is, in the end, inverted by her equally sudden re-embrace of married life in Alabama. What at first felt like unbearably constraining demands for conformity now appear as an escape from far worse fates. With this concluding return to matrimony and the religious South, the novel seems to turn against its own opening impetus. In the final sequence, the plots of romance and return reinscribe the limits of a raced female destiny where the domesticating roles of wife and child-bearer appear as the only alternatives to fallenness or death. Helga’s choice to crawl out of the gutter is a commitment to life but also to staving off omnipresent threats of literal and figurative falls. In the concluding pages, she fights at every turn to stay standing. Helga’s contemptuous bemusement at the congregation praying for her soul gives way to a nauseous dizziness. At the moment “she fell forward” the frenzied worshippers “clos[e] her in on all sides” (Q 113). When the Reverend Green walks her back to the hotel, the decision to seduce him into marriage likewise comes upon her in the instant she is “seized with a hateful feeling of vertigo and obliged to hold on his arm to keep from falling” (Q 115). The following day, Helga

\(^{33}\) As James acknowledges, “there can be no doubt that when men are reduced to their last extremity absolutism is the only saving scheme” (WII 615).
marries the man she deems guarantor of the conversionary promise of racial homecoming and permanent belonging. Their union is construed as a safeguard against the gutter, but she is soon laid flat by the labor of five consecutive pregnancies.

With the turn of a page, Helga has returned to the south and become Mrs. Reverend Green, pious wife and doting mother. With another turn she has become a spectral shadow, drained of all her vitality by unremitting poverty and procreation. Upon arrival, Helga “eagerly…accepted everything” about her new life, “even that bleak air of poverty” and “the atmosphere of self-satisfaction which poured from [her new husband] like gas from a leaking pipe” (Q 119). As before, Helga enjoys a temporary calm after the pre-departure storm. For a time, the “unbelievably bright sky” stretches wide with fresh possibility. But when she is bedbound, convalescing after the birth of her fourth child, “that bleak air” and moldering atmosphere close in to the point of “suffocation” and “asphyxiation” (Q 134). The vivid expanse of the “Chinese blue sky” narrows to a meager sliver: “‘Pie in the sky,’” Helga said aloud derisively….Pie—by and by. That’s the trouble’” (Q 134). The last words Helga Crane speaks in the novel assert that the skies lie when we take them to promise future deliverance from present suffering.

Though this oppressively airless conclusion feels incompatible with the rest of the novel, in fact, Helga’s conversion follows the same aversive turns as the previous scenes of transition. Even as she expresses hope that she might have broken out of the cycle of rising and releasing pressures, Helga acknowledges that her sudden departures and arrivals have been similarly structured by a common pattern of feeling. In the church, she is filled with the same ambivalent feelings amidst the “contact of bodies” in “concerted convulsions” that she had before the jazz club dancers and the ragtime minstrels (Q 112).
Her move to Alabama is accompanied by a “recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was really living”: “if she remembered that she had had something like this feeling before, she put the unwelcome memory from her…” (Q 118). But there comes a point when she can no longer hold the familiar affective upsurge at bay. Her relationship with Reverend Green is inexorably overtaken by her “unconquerable aversion.” Turning her face from him, Helga “cared nothing…for his hurt surprise” (Q 129). With the inevitable pressure change “she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree” (Q 134).

Our protagonist maintains that the aversive feelings guiding her conversion and its aftermath differ in degree rather than in kind from those that she has previously experienced. Emerson goes so far as to claim that a turn of aversion—understood as a “gesture of departing from oneself”—constitutes a transfiguring moment of conversion; in his account, aversive and conversionary turns are coextensive (On Leaving 31). Why, then, have so many readers felt this concluding sequence of events to be of an entirely different order than what came before? Most critics measure the difference in the degree of narrative control that Larsen exercises over narrative closure. Deborah McDowell’s introduction to the text confirms that critics “have consistently criticized the endings of her novels” for sacrificing her heroines “to the most conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death” (xi). Though Helga is still alive at the end of Quicksand, she has suffered a social and spiritual death. Passing (1929) ends even more abruptly with Clare Kendry’s ambiguous fall to her death from an open window. The novels’ “unearned
and unsettling endings” have been chalked up to Larsen’s lack of mastery over the novel form: their “abrupt and contradictory” imposition is taken to “reveal her difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly” (xii, xi). Nancy K. Miller’s study of gender and narrative form argues that women’s novels often feature “implausible twists of plot,” especially around the narrative conclusion, which suddenly veer away from convention (122). Through Quicksand’s turns in the opposite direction, towards conventional social plots, Larsen cultivates a reader response that is strangely akin to the one that Miller attributes to female writers who demand “something else” for their heroines—an “unscriptable wish” for a story that would turn out differently (123). Most critics attribute their frustration with Quicksand’s unsatisfying ending to two kinds of shortcomings: either Helga has proved inadequate to her character’s potential, or, Larsen has failed to achieve the novel’s fullest potential. But the very fact that Quicksand has solicited so much dissatisfaction with its unfulfilled narrative possibilities suggests that we may also imagine a life for Helga beyond the novel’s jarring conclusion.

Under what conditions could Larsen have closed the novel in a way that didn’t arrest all narrative drift and thus annul its working title Cloudy Amber? Is the protagonist’s eventual entrapment as inescapable as the new title Quicksand suggests? Like clouds and amber, quicksand is an emblem of material changes in state. The saturated sediment may act like a solid until pressure changes initiate liquefaction, causing the sand to form a suspension. In the novel, this suspended form of fluidity comes to represent treacherous flux from which there is no lifeline. Helga’s dream of “freedom and cities” finally sinks under the weight of her fifth pregnancy (Q 135).
Significantly, readers’ reactions indicate that Larsen has created narrative conditions wherein her protagonist’s plunging descent feels anything but inevitable.

As Bakhtin recognized, novels must have something like a coherent plot to be readable. But the same structures of closure that mark the difference between the shape of narrative and the shape of experience, he argued, also endanger our “sense of life as an open process” (Morson 79, 9). *Quicksand* shows how the narrative constraints of the novel form conspire with the deterministic logic of race and reproduction. Larsen works against these social and formal determinisms in two ways. From the outset, she develops a character who seems to have the potential to outstrip any predetermined plan for her. In this way, Helga’s “vague yearning” for “something else” (a phrase repeated ten times by my count) bespeaks her “unrealized potential” (to borrow Bakhtin’s words) (*Q* 10, *Dialogic Imagination* 37). In the end, Larsen stages a confrontation of open and closed narrative universes. Helga’s ultimate resignation to the promise of apparent stability—an existence stripped of surprises—is implicated in Larsen’s narrative relationship to her readers, for whom familiar forms of closure have been defamiliarized over the course of the novel. As evident in Chapters Two and Three, Jamesian syntax and Steinian grammar require that we go back to each disorienting sentence before we move on. Following Richard Poirier, Cavell terms this recursive requirement “slow reading,” which he defines as a “mode of…attention in which you are prepared to be taken by surprise, stopped, thrown back as it were upon the text” (*Cities* 15).* Quicksand’s disjunctive ending turns us back on what came before to grapple with how Helga’s indecipherability becomes

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34 Cavell’s conception of “slow reading” is closely related to the process of “reading in slow motion” that Richard Poirier discusses in “Reading Pragmatically: The Example of Hum 6,” published in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (180).
“plainly readable” (Color & Culture 80). Turning back, we also turn forward to glimpse a future for Helga and for the novel that extends beyond the limited prospects on offer.
Coda

Surprised By Silence

In the preceding pages, I have focused on the formal facets of literary modernism, exploring how processes of composition for several writers were guided by a shared set of imperatives: to construct sentences, paragraphs, scenes, and plots that take unexpected turns—in some cases unforeseen even by the person who wrote them. Those turns introduce strange folds and pockets in the grammatical and narrative fabric of essays by Emerson, Baudelaire, and Stein; of novels by Proust, James, and Larsen. Yet while such folds can visibly swell and amplify the surface of the text with new dimensions of possibility, they can also prove harder to discern, opening as silent and unprecipitated hinges or latent gaps within an argumentative, plotted, or lexical logic. We might here recall Emerson’s reliance on rhetorical rifts, the small overturning eddy placed between propositions such that no certainty is allowed to settle or stand. We might also recall Larsen’s heroine in Quicksand as an embodiment of this constant unsettlement; reversing life paths without warning or explanation, Helga fissures her own sense of coherence and threatens the coherence of the novel as a whole.

In neither case can surprise be definitively located in a moment, word, predicate, or object: Emerson’s surprises are elusively pocketed in the lacunae between sentences as they turn on one another, while Larsen’s surprises lodge in the chasms between chapters, where unexplained shifts in narrative trajectory interrupt the novel’s storyline and character arc. As the work of both writers demonstrates, literary surprise can often register not as a manifest narrative presence but in the negative blip of an elision.
What is to be made of surprise’s strange turns and gaps, which can compromise coherence and intelligibility? Why should such subtle intangibles matter to readers? As a final note, I want to suggest that in training our attention to these lacunae of surprise we also confront the most fundamental conditions of reading. As I have defined it, surprise is experienced as an unsettling suspension of time and cognition; the surprised consciousness is temporarily unmoored from its conventional patterns of perception. Such a disoriented state of attention may seem to bear little resemblance to a mind in the process of reading. However, encounters with literary representations of consciousness are strikingly congruent with surprise encounters to the extent that each requires us to traverse an uncertain border between me and not me. Both reading and surprise hinge on a constitutive gap between discrepant orders of consciousness. When we read we encounter another’s consciousness as if it were our own; when we are surprised we encounter our own consciousness as if it belonged to another. Such encounters baffle all efforts to demarcate the boundaries of a discrete self who apprehends another. Instead of a separate subject and object of apprehension, there emerges a simultaneous sense of apprehending and being apprehended by a consciousness that both is and is not one’s own.

Novels like James’s *The Ambassadors* and Proust’s *Recherche* invite readers to open themselves to the thoughts and feelings of their protagonists. Yet instead of facilitating a seamless merging, such an opening makes way for a more disjunctive jostling between consciousnesses that are experienced as both mine and not mine. Even the most powerfully immediate encounter between reader and book is marked by the hiatus between what characters like Strether or Marcel feel and the reader’s necessarily
belated response. This gap in feeling registers as a disconcerting delay in experience that designates the difference between the represented consciousness and the reader’s consciousness. Instead of making any effort to bridge this non-coincidence, the writers examined in this study heighten their readers’ sense of schism by inducing these backfolding gaps at the level of grammar and plot.

While those writers working in an Emersonian literary line were questioning how to attune themselves and their readers to intervals and absences, William James was developing experimental techniques for probing facets of consciousness that remained unregistered, unconsidered, unknown. As he readily admitted, “it is hard to focus our attention on the nameless” (PP 195). As I’ve suggested, James’s advice for cultivating a fresh awareness around unnamed, unnoticed registers of experience was to read writers like Emerson. Indeed, Emerson’s rhetorical pockets closely correspond with the potential pockets of encounter not yet discovered in James’s uncharted realms of consciousness. Accordingly, critics who read for surprise face a set of challenges similar to those James outlines for practitioners of introspection, his primary method of psychological investigation. The goal of introspection, like the goal of Emerson and his inheritors, is to cultivate “an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself” (WII 1143). However, James acknowledges an inevitable “difference between the immediate feltness of a feeling, and its perception by a subsequent reflective act,” just as the formal innovations explored in this study refract the impossibility of full immediacy (PP 65). In both cases, the unavoidable “difference” between feeling and reflection manifests as a temporal delay and a split subjective state. If, as James claims, the very first insight that introspection yields is that consciousness moves in a continuous and immersive stream, it
cannot be split into feeling and reflecting parts of consciousness without distortion. As James realizes, “No subjective state, whilst present, is its own object; its object is always something else” (PP 190). The “selfness of feeling” has already passed into another state by the time it is subsequently reflected upon. Always belated, introspection might more accurately be characterized as retrospection, an inferential process that relies on memory. James must then grapple with the question of whether introspection-as-retrospection necessarily reduces the moving, changing fluidity of consciousness to a static object of scrutiny excised from the stream. Like reading for surprise, learning to introspect one’s own psyche means yoking paradoxes of immediacy and delay, keen focus and a fissured consciousness.

As James emphasized in accounts of his introspective method, the challenges posed by splitting and belatedness are compounded by a problem of language. He observes how the difficulty of contemplating psychic processes on the edge of articulation results in “a certain vacuousness in the descriptive parts” of psychology (PP 195). If we are to discover something genuinely new about the nature of consciousness, we will inevitably encounter the limits of our frame of reference for describing what we have observed or experienced. Even the most fundamental introspective insight—that language is a rapid, continuous stream—is undermined by the fact that common descriptive language emphasizes the substantive parts of speech rather than the transitive parts. As a result, static, already-known entities are emphasized over unfamiliarity and change. Without perceptual or linguistic frames of reference, surprises register as interruptions rather than potential discoveries. With this recognition, James upholds William Wundt’s contention that “the surprise which unexpected impressions give us” is
due to the fact that our attention is not accommodated for what it fails to anticipate (*PP* 440). As James’s studies showed, it is exceptionally difficult to train attention to what is unanticipated because we have a limited capacity for perceiving phenomena that have not been “preperceived” and “labeled” according to previous encounters (*PP* 443-44).

Eluding ready recognition or easy expression, surprise encounters can have polarizing effects on attention: they might stimulate fresh sensitivity, but just as often unexpected phenomena may escape and even inhibit perception.

By reconceiving the introspective method as the basis of his pragmatic method James transforms error-inducing gaps and schisms into vital sources of insight. This pragmatist solution to the problem of introspective fallibility also instructively reframes reading for surprise as a way of attending to how the contingencies of life enter and alter composition. James’s transition from the field of psychology to philosophy is rooted in the recognition that introspective insights matter most when they have practical consequences in the day-to-day living of the person introspecting. For James, then, the truth value of all introspective findings came to be measured by the way they answer the pragmatist’s guiding question: “What concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life?” (*WII* 573). Introspection is thus re-tasked with discerning the difference that “our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs” might make in our daily existence (*PPII* 312).

Recast in terms of aesthetic and emotional discernment, the activities of introspecting consciousness and reading literature become reciprocal processes that bridge life and art. What unifies William James’s godfather Emerson, brother Henry, and former student Stein is the common commitment to fostering an order of attention that
might remain vitally responsive to those realms of experience which are recalcitrant to knowing or naming. Rather than requiring wholly absorbed concentration, the lacunae that lodge in literary scenes and syntaxes of surprise quicken a more diffuse awareness freed from predetermined direction. Instead of excluding distraction, interruption, and dispersal, this kind of attunement to namelessness recursively enfolds what William James describes as “the peculiar feeling of attention” (PP 440). The peculiarity of that recursive feeling of attention fluctuates between effortless floating and effortful straining, between spontaneous suspension and a taxing dearth of resting places.

While the field of psychology is tasked with filling the descriptive vacuum that exists around uncharted states of consciousness, writers who develop an aesthetics of surprise approach vacuity as an unknown quantity to be framed and felt rather than filled. In the literary genealogy I have traced, Stein’s non-narrative writing tests the outer limits of paying attention to the non-referential. However, the blank spots that punctuate her prose inaugurate an unexpected compositional legacy that is extended in new ways by the work of John Cage, who uses unpunctuated silence to further challenge our attention to the nameless. As Cage would attest, it was the exacting process of learning to read Stein that taught him to activate new angles of attunement to the indeterminacies of experience. Under the tutelage of Stein’s prose, Cage became aware of how structured silence allows the life’s contingencies to inflect what he called “composition as process” in unpredictable ways.¹

Cage exported this Steinian programme from the realm of language to the realm of music (“a language already without sentences and not confined to any subject”) in

¹ Cage’s lecture by that name is published in *Silence* (18-56).
order that its effect and its exposure be magnified by formal advantages inherent to music itself (*Empty Words* 65). Recognizing, for example, that people have “great difficulty” in “paying attention to something they don’t understand,” Cage saw music’s lesser emphasis on understanding as key to the receptivity of its audience: “Music is about changing the mind—not to understand, but to be aware” (Cage qtd. by Kostelanetz). As he found, the mind becomes most acutely aware of itself in contact with its surroundings when music is reconstrued as silence. In 4’33” (1952), his first “silent piece,” Cage enacts a radical redirection of the habitual vectors of noticing (*Silence* 98). Structured only by three noteless time brackets totaling a duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the ostensibly empty score offers no directive to its performers beyond “Pay[ing] attention to what it is, just as it is” (*Silence* 96). The extended caesurae Cage asserts in the auditory and visual field act by countering habits of hearing and seeing “for the sake of greater freshness”; instead of “an attempt to bring order out of chaos” he offers “a way of waking up to the very life we’re living” (*Silence* 106, 12). As Joan Retallack observes, Cage performs a “figure/ground swerve that opens up an entirely new perceptual and conceptual field: where what was previously ground (ambient *noise*) becomes figure (*music* reconfigured); where what previously lay dormant outside the scope of our attention becomes possibility” (xxxiii). In reconfiguring the conventional relation between music and noise, Cage cultivates an ambient awareness where attention and distraction, presence and absence are not easily distinguishable. He undoes meaning-making distinctions between sound and silence with an invitation to share in the experience of an empty receptivity. By reducing the border between art and life to the most permeable threshold possible, Cage exposes his audience to the daunting,
disorienting experience of living in a world guided by contingency and chance. In seeming response to Emerson’s foundational question—“Where do we find ourselves?”—Cage offers no directive beyond the implicit: Notice where you are, what you see, and what you hear. Like the transatlantic literary line that inspired him, Cage displaces a desire for answers with unknowing, and in the face of an uncertain universe, he advises we simply “send a message / Of surprise” (EL 471, Silence 161).


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