The Feeling of a Line
Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Psychology of Imagination

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is about the psychology of imagination in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In the critical account of this period, much has been written about the relation between literature and sight; it has hardly been noted, however, that the period was marked by the emergence of a field of research into a different kind of “vision” – the images produced by words on a page. My dissertation addresses this gap in two ways: first, in an account of a major shift in the psychological understanding of the mind’s eye in this period; second, in a series of readings which explore the ways in which writers and critics responded to this new science.

Both accounts begin with Francis Galton’s 1880 publication of “Statistics of Mental Imagery” – the first study of its kind. His findings – still cited by psychologists today – disrupted the idea that words predictably or even reliably produced “pictures” in the mind, thus troubling more than a century of philosophic and literary debate over the nature of mental representation. As William James observed in 1890, Galton’s study had “made an era in descriptive
Psychology.” After repeating Galton’s investigation in his own classroom, James concluded that “There are imaginations, not ‘The Imagination,’ and they must be studied in detail.”

My dissertation traces the work of a series of writers who drew upon this research. In chapters centered on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mark Twain, William James and Helen Keller – all of whom were familiar with Galton’s study – I locate a literary tradition which found its value not in objective correspondence with the outside world, but rather, in the embodied feeling of the mind at work. These writers took from psychology the premise that mental vision, like physical vision, had limits – limits defined by the body. While this limitation could be understood as a constriction, it also suggested the possibility that the imagination could take on the status of physical experience – that the mechanical act of transforming shapes into signs could become a form of training for “real” life.

In order to understand these texts, I argue, we must attend to what James described as the “half” of reading that is not present on the printed page – the “half” provided by the reader him or herself. In pursuing this claim, I model a style of critical analysis that remains grounded in close reading, but that nevertheless seeks to account for the reader’s imaginative experience. This style of reading critically re-orientates our understanding of these texts, moving us away from “problem” plots and unresolved themes, towards larger structures of perception. These writers, I argue, do not seek to inform us about another person’s experience; rather they provide us with a grammar of experience – a technique for living intended to last well beyond the moment when the book is set aside.
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There are no words – I can only point.
To William James. “I shall find myself still living upon him to the end.”
INTRODUCTION
The Varieties of Imaginative Experience

Before addressing yourself to any of the Questions on the opposite page, think of some definite object – suppose it is your breakfast-table as you sat down to it this morning – and consider carefully the picture that rises before your mind’s eye.¹

So began Sir Francis Galton’s inquiry into the nature of mental imagery – the first study of its kind.² Galton distributed his questionnaire first to dozens, then hundreds of respondents, hoping “to elicit the degree in which different persons possess the power of seeing images in their mind’s eye, and of reviving past sensations.”³ In the prompts that followed, the respondent was asked to reflect upon the quality of his or her own mental “reproductions.” “Are the colors of the china, of the toast, bread-crust, mustard, meat, parsley or whatever may have been on the table quite distinct and natural?” Galton asked.⁴ “Is the image dim or fairly clear? Is it comparable to

³ Galton, Inquiries, 255.
⁴ Ibid.
that of the actual scene?"\textsuperscript{5} “Are all the objects pretty well defined at the same time, or is the place of sharpest definition at any one moment more contracted than it is in a real scene?”\textsuperscript{6} Once the respondent had completed this exercise, he or she was asked to summon in “imagination the objects specified in the six following paragraphs” – comparing the “mental representation” of them “to the actual sensation”:

A. *Light and colour.* – An evenly clouded sky (omitting all landscape), first bright, then gloomy. A thick surrounding haze, first white, then successively blue, yellow, green, and red.

B. *Sound.* – The beat of rain against the window panes, the crack of a whip, a church bell, the hum of bees, the whistle of a railway, the clinking of tea-spoons and saucers, the slam of a door.

C. *Smells.* – Tar, roses, an oil-lamp blown out, hay, violets, a fur coat, gas, tobacco.

D. *Tastes.* – Salt, sugar, lemon juice, raisins, chocolate, currant jelly.

E. *Touch.* – Velvet, silk, soap, gum, sand, dough, a crisp dead leaf, the prick of a pin.

F. *Other sensations.* – Heat, hunger, cold, thirst, fatigue, fever, drowsiness, a bad cold.\textsuperscript{7}

Galton, who was able to perform the task of visualization with some effort, was startled by the response:

The earliest results of my inquiry amazed me. I had begun by questioning friends in the scientific world, as they were the most likely class of men to give accurate answers concerning this faculty of visualizing, to which novelists and poets continually allude, which has left an abiding mark on the vocabularies of every language, and which supplies the material out of which dreams and the well-known hallucinations of sick people are built. To my astonishment, I found that the great majority of the men of science to whom I first applied protested that mental imagery was unknown to them, and they looked on me as fanciful and fantastic in supposing that the words ‘mental imagery’ really

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 256.
expressed what I believed everybody supposed them to mean. They had no more notion of its true nature than a color-blind man, who has not discerned his defect, has of the nature of color. They had a mental deficiency of which they were unaware, and naturally enough supposed that those who affirmed they possessed it, were romancing.⁸

Later, when Galton expanded his survey, he found a great number of people who did indeed experience vivid visions – individuals who described strange mental landscapes that had previously gone unremarked. But for some, burdened with an unsuspected “mental deficiency,” this faculty could be said to be almost entirely absent.⁹ In the words of one skeptical respondent,

‘These questions presuppose assent to some sort of a proposition regarding the ‘mind’s eye,’ and the ‘images’ which it sees. … This points to some initial fallacy. … It is only by a figure of speech that I can describe my recollection of a scene as a ‘mental image’ which I can ‘see’ with my ‘mind’s eye.’ … I do not see it … any more than a man sees the thousand lines of Sophocles which under due pressure he is ready to repeat.’¹⁰

[Ellipses Galton’s.]

As Galton pointed out, the images conjured in imagination had often been described by “novelists and poets,” but for this respondent, and those like him, the “mind’s eye” seemed to be nothing more than a “romance” – a simple “figure of speech.”

The idea that words produced “images” was a mainstay of nineteenth-century philosophical and literary rhetoric. Indeed, the two major literary movements of the century – romanticism and realism – both implicitly relied on an idea that the reader would somehow be made to share in the writer’s “vision.” Yet, while “imagery” had been a key term in literary discourse for more than a century, the understanding of the mind’s eye as field of formal psychological research was an innovation of the 1880s. Indeed, the full phrase “mental image,”

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⁸ Ibid., 59.
⁹ As one respondent put it, “My powers are zero. To my consciousness there is almost no association of memory with objective visual impressions. I recall the breakfast table but do not see it.” Ibid., 64.
¹⁰ Ibid., 59.
with its sense of discrete, technical precision, did not take on currency until the last two decades of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11}

This is not to suggest that mental imagery had gone entirely un-theorized in an earlier era. To the contrary, the nature, source and quality of the images produced by a text was a matter of

\textsuperscript{11} Though a full statistical analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation, some points of reference: In the American Periodicals Series Online, a full-text database of over 1,000 periodicals published between 1740 and 1940 in a variety of genres, the phrase “mental image” occurs over 600 times. More than half of those references, however, occur in the period between 1880 and 1910, with marked spikes in 1881 and 1888. The phrase occurs 337 times in that period; it only appears 108 times in the years between 1910-1940 – a marked decline, given the fact that the results of a database search would naturally skew towards more recent years with more complete coverage. In the Eighteenth Century Collections Online database (which contains every text printed in United Kingdom in the eighteenth century) the phrase “mental image” only appears nine times, and never in the concrete sense of “mental representation”; the phrase “mental imagery” occurs not at all. Perhaps just as telling, the Oxford English Dictionary, in its listing for “image” in the explicit and discrete sense of “mental representation,” cites a cluster of six sources between 1874 and 1904 – all psychological, including references from James Sully and William James, both of whose work I will discuss in the chapters that follow. Finally, though I take these charts only as indicators, a Google timeline search for the phrase “mental imagery” shows a distinct uptick in the use of the phrase in 1880, matched only by its resurgence in the early years of the 21st century.
extended debate throughout the nineteenth century. This debate turned upon the validity of a
given metaphor – mirror or lamp, theater or camera obscura, photographic plate or wax tablet. In
1880, however, Galton set out to objectively investigate the process by which a word made a
“picture” in the mind. Rather than hypothesize about the nature and quality of the images that
were conjured by a given phrase, Galton asked. By aggregating the results of his reading
questionnaire, Galton hoped to put an end to merely “speculative” theories about the mind’s eye.
If the imagination had been the province of philosophers and poets, it was now also the province
of psychologists – a field of empirical investigation.
Figure 1. Varieties of mental imagery, submitted by respondents to the breakfast-table questionnaire, from Francis Galton, Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development (1883).
I. The Study of Mental Imagery

Galton’s 1880 study was the first attempt to objectively document the function of the mind’s eye. Indeed, the first citation for the word “visualization” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is drawn from a review of Galton’s results. Galton’s “investigations into the phenomena of visualization, number-forms, &c., are very curious,” the reviewers write, in the sentence that supplies the definition. They continue,

… as so many eminent persons testify to the reality of the phenomena, it is difficult to doubt that there is some truth in them. At the same time, to those introspective people who have never themselves experienced anything in the remotest degree resembling them, they certainly sound, at first hearing, extremely incredible. One’s first impulse, indeed, is to believe that hundreds of intelligent and scientifically minded correspondents have entered into a vast conspiracy to deceive Mr. Galton; and, even after one has read oneself out of this primitive incredulity, it is hard to suppose that the ‘subjects’ have not highly colored their descriptions of their own peculiar faculty. If the phenomena are really genuine, we cannot deny that it is so much the worse for our hopes of raising psychology to the position of a real science; for the existence of such singular diversities of mental faculty between individuals, if proved, would make unification and generalization in psychological matters even more difficult and more hopeless than ever.

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13 *Visualization* here means “the power or process of forming a mental picture or vision of something not actually present to the sight; a picture thus formed.” The *OED* cites the first reference in 1883; in fact, the term also appears in Galton’s 1880 articles on the subject. A number of similar terms emerged in this period: the first reference for the term “visualizer” is 1886. The term “visualize,” in the specific sense of “To form a mental picture of something not visible or present, or of an abstract thing, etc.; to construct a visual image or images in the mind” appears in 1871, with regard to visualizing numbers.

14 Grant Allen, review of *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*, *The Academy*, no. 584 (July 1883), 31.
The reviewers here point to the problem presented to any individual who wishes to document mental imagery – a field defined by its radical interiority. Given that these reports were unverifiable, how was the psychologist to know “if the phenomena are really genuine”?\(^{15}\)

Later, psychologists would dismiss the subject of mental imagery precisely because it could not be directly observed. The advent of behaviorism in 1913 was premised on the very impossibility of describing mental imagery with empirical accuracy.\(^{16}\) Because one could not scientifically document the field of the mind, the work of the psychologist became reoriented towards categories of behavior that were, in fact, observable. In a now-famous article, John B. Watson, a founder of the behaviorist school, argued that mental imagery should be dismissed from psychology altogether. “Can image type be experimentally tested and verified?” he asked.\(^{17}\)

The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; when it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation. We have become so enmeshed in speculative questions

\(^{15}\) In his review of Galton’s early studies, Alexander Bain, a prominent philosopher, likewise questioned the usefulness of Galton’s observations. Indeed, though Bain speculated that Galton’s research showed promise, in his estimation, it had “little of the precision needed for psychology” ("Notes," 567). William James disagreed. Alexander Bain, “Notes and Discussions: Mr. Galton’s Statistics of Mental Imagery,” *Mind* 20 (October 1880): 564-573.

\(^{16}\) As Gerald E. Myers has observed, William James was an exception to this rule. “James,” he notes, “though himself a poor visualizer, never doubted the common occurrence of images” (William James, 101). Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

concerning the elements of mind, the nature of conscious content … that I, as an 
experimental student, feel that something is wrong with our premises and the types of 
problems which develop from them. 18

Watson’s view, echoed by later behaviorists, dominated American psychology for most of the 
twentieth century. 19 Indeed, the discussion of mental imagery was effectively exiled from 
psychological discourse until the late 1960s, when new technologies offered the prospect of 
studying the process of visualization with scientific rigor. 20

Watson’s critique foreshadows the position of literary scholars who have wished to take up the topic. In his seminal Iconology (1986), W. J. T. Mitchell outlined the difficulty that 
mental imagery has traditionally presented for literary study: “The problem philosophers and 
ordinary people have always had with the notion of mental images is that they seem to have a 
universal basis in real, shared experience (we all dream, visualize, and are capable, in varying 
degrees, of re-presenting concrete sensations to ourselves). But we cannot point to them and say 
‘There – that is a mental image.’” 21 Thus, though students of literature may easily engage in a

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18 Ibid.

19 As Nigel J. T. Thomas has written, “Evidence for the occurrence of any experience is necessarily subjective and introspective, and, because of this, those who have doubts about the validity of introspection as a scientific method, may well be led to question whether there is any place for a concept such as imagery within a truly scientific world view” (“Mental Imagery”). Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson and Giorgio Ganis made a similar observation in 2006: “A major problem in theorizing about the nature of mental images has been their inherently private nature, which long prevented objective assessment of their structure or function. This problem led some behaviorists to reject the very idea of mental imagery, and to banish it from scientific discussion” (Case for Mental Imagery, 4-5). Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson and Giorgio Ganis, The Case For Mental Imagery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

20 Thomas writes, “Although few later Behaviorist psychologists (or their philosophical allies) expressed themselves on the matter in quite the strong and explicit terms sometimes used by Watson, the era of Behaviorist psychology is characterized by a marked skepticism about imagery (if not its existence, at least its psychological importance) amongst both psychologists and philosophers. Imagery did not become widely discussed again among scientific psychologists (or philosophers of psychology) until around the end of the 1960s, when Behaviorism began to be displaced by Cognitivism as the dominant psychological paradigm)” (“Mental Imagery”). Kosslyn, Thompson and Ganis echo this point: “Like views predominated until methods developed in cognitive psychology offered a way to begin to assess properties of internal representations, which opened the door to studying mental imagery objectively” (Case for Mental Imagery, 5).

discussion of poetic or novelistic “imagery,” literary scholars (with some notable exceptions) have largely avoided the subject of mental imagery. As Mitchell notes, “people may report experiencing images in their heads while reading or dreaming, but we have only their words for this; there is no way (so the argument goes) to check up on this objectively.”

By the end of the twentieth century, mental imagery had returned as a subject for psychology and cognitive neuroscience has now begun to recover some of the insights of late nineteenth-century psychologists. Current researchers credit Galton with the earliest serious work in this field, as William James did in 1890. Indeed, Galton’s “Statistics of Mental Imagery” is still referenced as an authoritative source in psychological research today. With the notable addition of MRI technology, the technique for investigating mental imagery has remained substantially unchanged since Galton’s 1880 study, and a number of now-standard questionnaires are distributed by psychologists who wish to assess a subject’s imaging ability.

In recent years, literary scholars have become newly attentive to developments in the study of cognition. Elaine Scarry was among the first to investigate the role that mental imagery might play in the reader’s experience of poetry and fiction. Scarry’s *Dreaming by the Book* (1999), drew on Stephen Kosslyn’s account of visual imaging in order to describe a set of

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22 Ibid., 13.

23 As Thomas has written, “most informed contemporary discussions of imagery, amongst both philosophers and psychologists, are still very much shaped by this recent history of skepticism about imagery (or iconophobia, as it is sometimes called), and the subsequent reaction against it” (“Mental Imagery”).

24 As I have noted above, both the *Stanford* and *Oxford* history cite Galton as first in the field. I have found no earlier citation in any current study of mental imagery. In Osherson, Kosslyn and Gleitman’s volume on the subject, Galton is described as “one of the first to study imagery”; there is no earlier reference (Invitation, 278). Daniel N. Osherson, Stephen Michael Kosslyn, and Lila R. Gleitman, *An Invitation to Cognitive Science*, vol. 2, *Visual Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

25 As recently as 2006, researchers had accepted Galton’s finding that “scientific men as a class” had only “feeble mental imagery.” W. F. Brewer and M. Schommer-Aikins, “Scientists are not deficient in mental imagery: Galton revised,” *Review of General Psychology* 10 (2006): 130-146.

26 Nicholas Wright Gillham notes that “a questionnaire [Galton] designed over a hundred years ago is still at the root of studies designed to probe the nature of mental imagery today” (A *Life*, 279).
“formal practices” that seemed particularly suited to producing vivid mental perceptions.27

Though Scarry was something of an outlier at the time, Scarry’s work can now be understood as a foundational text in the field of cognitive cultural studies. The discussion of mental imagery now comprises only one prong of a much more ambitious project that, in the words of one recent scholar, seeks to combine “literary and cultural analysis with insights from neuroscience, discursive psychology, cognitive evolutionary psychology and anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and philosophy of mind.”28

In part because of its fractured history, however, the early psychology of mental imagery has not yet been addressed by literary scholars.29 Indeed, in university art and literature departments, Galton is best known for his early work with composite photography. In 1878, Galton undertook a series of experiments in which he proposed to produce definitive visual representations of various “types.” By combining multiple exposures of many different people,

27 Elaine Scarry, Dreaming by the Book (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 239. Scarry applies the insights of late twentieth-century neuropsychology to texts across time and place. In this respect, I would suggest, Scarry’s work remains speculative, as it relies upon a definitive understanding of how reading in fact works upon a universal brain. My claim is historical, rather than cognitive – a perhaps more limited approach, but also, I hope, more precise.


29 Oliver Sacks suggests that Galton understood mental imagery to be a “reproduction or reconstruction of experience” and did not take account of mental imagery of “a more abstract and visionary kind” – that is to say, “images of something which has never been seen by the physical eye but which can be conjured up by the creative imagination and serve as models for investigating reality” (The Mind’s Eye, 224). In offering this critique, Sacks approvingly refers to the work of John Tyndall, who, in 1870 (ten years prior to Galton), discussed “mental images of the ultra-sensible” (qtd. in The Mind’s Eye, 224).

In Principles of Psychology (1890), Tyndall’s work merits mention by William James. James, like Sacks, was concerned to recover the “abstract and visionary” nature of mental imagery; unlike Sacks, however, James did not focus upon the possibility of creating images that had “never been seen by the physical eye” – that is to say, images beyond experience. (It is perhaps for this reason that Tyndall made little impression.) Rather, in order to provide empirical evidence for the abstract – that is to say, non-representational – qualities of mental imagery, James, referencing Galton, made precisely the contrary turn. Instead of asserting that imagination could transcend the bounds of experience, James looked to figures like Melville Ballard (born deaf) and Laura Bridgman (blind-deaf), individuals whose imaginations were definitively limited by experience. Their reports became important documents in James’s effort to prove that “abstract and visionary” thinking was not at a special remove from perceptual experience.
Galton produced images of “the Consumptive,” “the Criminal,” and “the Jew.” In “The Body and the Archive” (1986), Allan Sekula shows how these composite photographs worked as part of a larger bureaucratic movement to document – and thus control – those outside the norm of society. Galton’s composites, Sekula observes, were founded upon the principles of phrenology and physiognomy – “new regulatory sciences directed at the body.” In this way, the photographs literalize what Sekula calls the “deterrent or repressive logic” of an objectivist scientific gaze. Sekula’s article has become a canonical piece in nineteenth-century cultural studies, and a crucial addition to the history of photography. As such, Galton has become a key figure in a historical account that positions what Sekula calls “technical or scientific realism” at the heart of eugenics, bureaucracy, statistics and other agents of repressive power.

Galton’s study of mental imagery was an attempt to extend these techniques into the mind itself. Galton’s early results, outlined in his 1880 report, “Statistics of Mental Imagery,” were expanded, and later collected in three long chapters of his Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development (1883). Galton, the founder of the eugenics movement in England, framed the book as an investigation into the “varied hereditary faculties of different men, and of the great differences in different families and races.” The results of the breakfast-table questionnaire are included alongside chapters on physiognomy (“the typical English face; its change at different historical periods”); energy (“the attribute of high races”); character (“caprice and coyness of females”); instincts (“gregarious and slavish”); and an account of his work with

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30 Sander Gilman perhaps puts it best: “Galton was of course no Nazi, but he was a racist” (Review, 469). Sander Gilman, review of A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics, by Nicholas Wright Gillham, Perspectives in Biology and Medicine 45, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 468-470.


32 Ibid., 7.

33 Sekula points out that the central metaphor in Foucault is optical (“Body,” 8).

34 Galton, Inquiries, 1.
composite portraiture. The “general object” of these projects and others was to learn “the practicability of supplanting inefficient human stock by better strains,” and he supported public policies designed to minimize the reproduction of the “less fitted.”

Sander Gilman has warned of the difficulty of “dealing with nineteenth-century ‘scientific’ thinkers such as Galton.” Any attempt to “balance the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ aspects of Galton’s thought” will “prove impossible, as both aspects are part of one another.” To associate Galton with figures such as William James and John Dewey is neither an effort to vindicate Galton, nor an effort to cast a shadow on those whom his research influenced. To the extent that his results – and his method – continue to provide a model for the exploration of the imagination, it seems important to address the multiple legacies of his work.

One of those legacies, I will argue, is literary. Indeed, though the study of “visual culture” now takes a major part in the account of late nineteenth-century literature, it has hardly been noted that the period was also marked by the emergence of field of research into the kind of “vision” produced by words on a page. Thus, while much has been said about the way in which novel and complex sights (the rise of the city, the rise of mass communication) changed literary practice in this period, very little has been written about the emergence of a new understanding of the complexity of “inner” sight — that is to say, of the imagination.

In the pages that follow, my effort will be to demonstrate the ways in which a new idea of reading – an imagination of imagination – informed the work of a series of writers who were

35 Ibid. 1; 219.
36 Sander Gilman, Review, 469
37 Ibid., 468.
38 In the American context, the discussion of “visuality” has largely been defined in terms of what Nancy Bentley has described as changes in “mass culture.” In Frantic Panoramas (2009), Bentley provides a compelling account of the ways in which a new set of “sights” reoriented modes of spectatorship in nineteenth-century America. Nancy Bentley, Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
attuned to this science. In this respect, I am not concerned whether this psychology is itself tenable, or even fully consistent in its application. Notably, the abiding observational problem posed by mental imagery – its stubborn interiority – also makes it particularly amenable to historical re-description.\textsuperscript{39} I begin with the idea that the description itself matters; that the account of the imagination in any given period has real effects on literary output – both in defining its possibilities and determining its scope. In turn, I will argue, we can begin to understand these authors as theorists – and, more important, makers – of the imagination in their own right.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} M. H. Abrams has written of “the role of analogy in shaping the structure of a critical theory” (\textit{Mirror}, 158). As he points out, “Nowhere is this role more conspicuous than in discussions of the psychology of art. The only direct evidence in regard to the nature of the mental processes are those shadowy and fugitive items available to introspection…. Expressed in the terms of our day: mental events must be talked about metaphorically, in an object-language which was developed to deal literally with the physical world. As a result, our conception of these events is peculiarly amenable to the formative influence of the physical metaphors in which we discuss them, and of the underlying physical analogies from which these metaphors are derived” (Ibid.). M. H. Abrams, \textit{The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition}, 1953 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

\textsuperscript{40} My approach throughout will be rather stubbornly historical, rather than cognitive. One of the things that emerges most clearly in the early psychology is the degree to which an established literary discourse defined the possible questions that were asked about mental imagery. To take an example from our own cultural moment: Michael Holquist has used an M.R.I. machine to take a picture of the brain’s activity while a subject reads a sentence. In a lecture at the M.L.A. conference in Los Angeles in January 2010, Holquist explained that he chose sentences from Proust, Woolf and Henry James, as they are the “most complex” sentences that can be mentally processed (interestingly, many of these sentences take \textit{too long to read} to be captured in a single scan of the machine). But because he begins with the assumption that modernist sentences are \textit{in fact} the “most complex,” whatever the M.R.I. scan reveals about these sentences will \textit{come to reflect that truth}. I do not see this approach as substantively different from attempts to interrogate 100 subjects about the images that arise in the mind when prompted to picture “a careworn face,” as I will discuss in the section that follows.
Figure 2. Composite images from Francis Galton, *Inquiries* (1883).
II. Special To Themselves

Galton had distributed his questionnaire with the expectation that the responses would objectively “illustrate the essential differences between the mental operations of different persons.”41 And yet, upon retrieving the results, he conceded that the reports “do not profess to be of service in the general statistical sense.”42 Indeed, throughout his discussion of mental imagery, Galton repeats his main finding:

It will be seen in the end how greatly metaphysicians and psychologists may err, who assume their own mental operations, instincts, and axioms to be identical with those of the rest of mankind, instead of being special to themselves. The differences between men are profound, and we can only be saved from living in blind unconsciousness of our own mental peculiarities by the habit of informing ourselves as well as we can of those of others.43

The spectrum of response was far broader than he, or his colleagues, had suspected. Some respondents reported a panoramic inner vision, in which a single “view” could contain more than the physical eye could perceive (Galton likened this to the vision of a hare, with eyes set wide apart).44 Some described a kind of omnipresent “touch-sight” in which one could, “at the same moment, visualize all round the image of a solid body.”45 Some watched scenes as if from above, watching themselves as an actor on a mental stage.46 Some saw objects as transparent forms.

Some had the ability to flexibly rotate mental objects in space. Some connected their images with

41 Galton, Inquiries, 57. In assessing the “visualizing faculty” across multiple populations, he presumed that it “would be unequally developed in different races, and that a large natural gift of the visionary faculty might become characteristic not only of certain families, as among the second-sight seers of Scotland, but of certain races, as that of the Gipsies” (Ibid., 125).
42 Ibid., 61.
43 Ibid., 32.
44 Ibid., 68.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 69.
the “points of a compass, real or imaginary,” and thus had a “strong geographical tendency” in their mental landscape.47 (Figure 1.) In the end, Galton found that women and children described somewhat more vivid mental imagery than men did; and yet this was amongst the only statistical distinctions he was able to identify. Indeed, even given his immense effort to classify the images, the responses did not point to the aggregation of mental experience, but to the fact of its irreducible diversity.

The results of the breakfast-table questionnaire formed the basis for William James’s account of the imagination – as also for John Dewey, Joseph Jastrow and any number of psychologists working in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.48 James went so far as to say that the publication of “Statistics of Mental Imagery” had “made an era in descriptive Psychology.”49 James took from Galton an acknowledgment of individuality, of the vast variety of imaginative experience. “Until very recent years it was supposed by all philosophers that there was a typical mind which all individual minds were like and that propositions of universal validity could be laid down about such faculties as ‘the Imagination,’” James wrote.50 Galton’s research, James said, revealed “how false a view this is” — “There are imaginations, not ‘The Imagination,’ and they must be studied in detail.”51

At stake in this new study was a longstanding understanding of mental imagery, drawn from more than a century of literary discourse. Thus, for example, when researchers repeated

47 Ibid.
48 “The first quantitative instrument for evaluating experienced mental imagery was developed by Betts (1909) on the basis of Galton’s original questionnaire. He described it simply as a ‘Questionnaire upon Mental Imagery’ (QMI), and it consisted of 150 items covering seven different sensory modalities. The first section contained 40 items on visual imagery: eight about ‘your breakfast table as you sat down to it this morning.’” B. R. Hergenhahn, An Introduction to the History of Psychology, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 305. See also Richardson, Imagery, 12.
50 Ibid., 49-50.
51 Ibid., 50.
Galton’s breakfast-table inquiry at Princeton and Vassar in 1884, they reminded their readers that the very phrase “the mind’s eye” had been Shakespeare’s original coinage. The report concluded with a tabulation of statistical results, but, as was typical of similar pieces, the writers began by describing the crucial importance of imagery in the appreciation of writing. “The mind delights to form such pictures,” they observed, “and it is the office of the poet and novelist to raise them up by the presentations they furnish.” The motivation for the entire study, in fact, was framed in terms drawn from fiction and poetry:

We can recall the sensation produced by odors, say from roses, lilies, and violets, or from asafoetida, swamps, and malarial pools. Some of these are of an ethereal nature, and have a place allowed them in poetry. We can call up a thousand kinds of sounds, as the voices of our friends, the sighings of the breeze or stream, the barking of the dog, the meowing of the cat, the bellowing of the bull, the lowing of cattle, the chirp or the song of birds – say of the thrush or nightingale, the screech of the eagle, the rasping of the file, the mower whetting his scythe, the roar of the storm, the lashing of the wave on the shore, the rolling of the thunder, the crash of the avalanche. People endowed with a musical ear can recall tunes and are prompted to repeat them, and some are constantly hearing musical airs.

‘Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrate in the memory;
Odors, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.’

There are touches which we easily remember – of softness, say of satin or of a smooth skin, or of the prickliness of a briar thorn. The child retains forever the memory of a mother’s kiss. But we get our most vivid and varied memories from the sense of sight. We delight to remember colors, say of a flower or a piece of dress, of the morning and evening sky. We image certain forms, as of the persons and faces of our friends, of

53 Ibid., 51.
noble trees, of well-proportioned buildings, of mountains. All that is picturesque, that is picture-like, that is with a well-defined shape, as steeples, cliffs, precipices, leave a photograph of themselves on our souls. The artist uses many of these in his paintings, in his portraits, and in his landscapes. The poet turns them to all sorts of uses in pleasing, in exciting and elevating the mind.54

The list is a nearly exhaustive catalogue of literary tropes of the period: the mother’s kiss, the song of the thrush and nightingale, the looming steeple, the briar thorn. In this account of imagination, mental images play a crucial role in the relation between the poet and the reader: the images one perceives in the world “leave a photograph of themselves on our souls”; the poet uses this repository of images in the work of writing a poem; the reader, then, “can call up” this image when presented with the proper poetic prompt. Here, the poet and reader alike share in a common “store of images or photographs” – one which “every man, woman, and child” has built “of the objects which have been perceived.”55

The passage itself is presented as a demonstration of this process; as the reader moves through the catalogue, he or she is implicitly asked to “recall” each of the listed items. The poetic reference is thus enlisted in both confirming and creating a seemingly universal “we” – an imagination which “every man, woman, and child” would share. It was the logic of this “every one” that made it possible to think of the imagination as a field of empirical investigation at all.

Yet, even as the authors invoke a common “we” at the beginning of the article, that very “we” was disrupted by the results investigation itself. Indeed, in the same article, after cataloguing the many pleasures of imagery, the researchers nevertheless acknowledged that the results of their inquiry raised questions about the very paradigm they had set out to investigate.

54 Ibid., 52. It is particularly interesting to recall that this article was written not before photography, but before recorded sound was widely available. (The phonograph was invented by Edison in 1877.)
55 Ibid., 50.
As they pointed out, with some puzzlement, the responses they had gathered to the questionnaire indicated that “our powers of reviving the impressions of different senses are very uneven.”

Thus, for example, the seemingly universal ability to recall the scent of “roses, lilies, and violets” invoked in their opening remarks seemed in fact to be available to “only a few persons” of the sixty who submitted responses. More disturbing, however,

There seems to be no invariable correlation between power of imaging objects and that of reviving states of mind or feeling, (*Question 11*); while many persons possess both, others vividly recall emotions with no power of imagery, or the reverse. … A careworn face rouses a sudden sympathy; associated together, the face and the emotion make a lasting stamp on the memory. Why are they dissociated in their revival, the sympathy actually, perhaps painfully, felt again; the face perchance a mere recollection, as of a dry fact with no mental picture? This is an unexplainable inequality in the action of the reproductive powers, which is without question characteristic of many minds. … It is a familiar fact that images have certain physiological and emotional states, as the condition of their making a strong impression upon the memory; but it is a curious and rather unlooked-for truth, that similar states of body and mind effect very diverse results in different people.  

To ask a psychological question about a “careworn face” suggests the strength of an older paradigm of imagery – largely metaphorical, now made amenable to statistical investigation.

And yet, the study itself revealed only an “unexplainable inequality in the action of the reproductive powers” – a somewhat “unlooked-for” kink in the poetic mechanism the researchers

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56 Ibid., 69.  
57 Ibid.  
58 Ibid., 69-70.  
59 In a recent essay on “Multisensory Imagery,” G. Gabrielle Starr defines mental imagery as the act of “closing your eyes and imagining your mother’s face or constantly rehearsing a musical phrase you can’t get out of your head” (“Multisensory,” 276-7). Here Starr draws upon the familiar trope of the “mother’s face” as well. G. Gabrielle Starr, “Multisensory Imagery,” in *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine, 275-291 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
had described earlier in the piece.

As M. H. Abrams has noted, Wordsworth’s approach to poetry depended upon “the assumption that human nature, in its passions and sensibilities no less than its reason, is everywhere fundamentally the same.”

The very idea that, as James observed, there were “imaginations, not ‘The Imagination’” hints at the potential disruption produced by Galton’s study. Though clearly perplexed by this “curious truth,” the writers did not take pains to draw out the implications of their findings upon the meaning of a literary tradition that understood its task to be “reviving states of mind or feeling.” But the possibility that an unexpected image could arise – or perhaps no image at all – suggests a problem for a paradigm of literature that understood images to be the currency of exchange between reader and writer.

In the poetic context, the logic of ut pictura poesis proposed an equivalence between the act of reading and that of picturing. Though, by 1880, this was becoming an outmoded critical standard, as W. J. T. Mitchell observes, “the vocabulary of imagery and picturing” nevertheless continued to “dominate discussions of verbal art in the nineteenth century.”

“The poetic consequences” of this tradition, he notes, resulted in “a thoroughgoing pictorialism, an understanding of the art of language as the art of reviving the original impressions of sense.”

60 Abrams, Mirror, 104.

61 Mitchell, Iconology, 25. As M. H. Abrams explains, in the early nineteenth century, the mirror model of mind as a “passive receiver for images” was replaced by the more active metaphor of the “lamp” projecting “life, physiognomy, and passion into the universe” (Mirror, 57; 64). Notably, however, in spite of their difference, both reflection and projection are models of clear and unobstructed relation between writer and world – and by extension, writer and reader. Indeed, in the “lamp” model “the objects signified by a poem tend to be regarded as no more than a projected equivalent – an extended and articulated symbol – for the poet’s inner state of mind” (Mirror, 24-5). By this logic, then, the objects signified would likewise be reconverted into an “inner state of mind” that would, to all extents and purposes, reflect that of the poet. In fact, it was “essential to poetry that its language be the spontaneous and genuine, not the contrived and simulated, expression of the emotional state of the poet” (Mirror, 102). Whereas mimetic models of art would seek to reproduce objects in the mind of the reader, the expressive model would seek to reproduce feelings – in either case, however, the relation between writer and reader was unobstructed; and in either case, the medium was images.

62 Mitchell, Iconology, 23. As Ray Frazer has written, “According to the theory of the association of ideas, the appreciation of art was the exact reversal of its creation: the reader’s spaniel followed the writer’s back through the
Though entirely different in its aims, the rhetoric surrounding literary realism likewise relied upon – and even enforced – an understanding of an untroubled transmission between the author’s “sight” and that of the reader.\textsuperscript{63} As Martin Jay has written, “nineteenth-century realist fiction… called on the author’s visual acuity to create its effect of represented reality, the novel’s ‘holding a mirror to nature,’ in Stendhal’s famous phrase.”\textsuperscript{64} The author’s commitment to visual description would, in turn, produce a “vision” of similar vivacity.\textsuperscript{65} Thus, as Ian Watt has written, “Realist or Naturalist theory” was characterized at times by a “physiological reductionism” that conceived of “artistic communication as a simple circuit which transferred the artist’s immediate sensory impression to his reader, like a photograph being developed in words and handed over to the recipient.”\textsuperscript{66}

The study of mental imagery, however, suggested that such a “simple circuit” could no longer be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{67} As many respondents testified, words often produced images that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item This is why, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe can mobilize both the realist and the romantic tradition in \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}, without contradiction. Part of the novel is drawn from observation of the conditions of slavery, in the mode of realism; the ending, however, is drawn from her dream-vision of Uncle Tom’s death. In either case, the process of writing is understood to be a \textit{transcription} of a vision (whether outer or inner) – a vision that the reader will share in upon reading.
\item Balzac described realism as “the literature of images” (qtd. in Jay, \textit{Downcast}, 110). As Jay notes, “By the time of Goncourt brothers and Emile Zola [that is to say, by the 1880s], it has become a commonplace to remark on novelists’ ‘photographic’ descriptions of the observed world” (\textit{Downcast}, 112).
\item Ian Watt, “Conrad’s Preface to \textit{The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’}” \textit{NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction} 7, no. 2 (Winter 1974): 104-5. See also Ian Watt, \textit{The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). Realism is, of course, hardly associated with imagination; indeed, imagination is, in some sense, precisely the term that is elided by the realist posture.
\item In \textit{The Salon of 1859}, Charles Baudelaire famously derides the realist impulse in art, mocking those who suggest that “‘art is, and can only be, the exact reproduction of nature’” (\textit{Salon}, 295). Rather, Baudelaire privileges a strange, idiosyncratic inner “vision” over that of external sight. Indeed, Baudelaire argues that art – whether visual or literary (Ibid., 298) – should \textit{not} be understood as a task of transcribing an outward scene: “More and more,” he writes, art is “prostrating itself before external reality, and the painter is becoming more and more inclined to paint
were not in any way related to their stated meaning.\textsuperscript{68} One woman provided Galton with an account of her imagined alphabet:

\begin{quote}
\ldots in the word “Tuesday,” when I think of each letter separately, the consonants are purplish-black, \( u \) is a light dove colour, \( e \) is a pale emerald green, and \( a \) is yellow; but when I think of the whole word together, the first part is a light gray-green, and the latter part yellow. \ldots Thus the word “red” assumes a light-green tint, while the word “yellow” is light-green at the beginning and red at the end.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

The resultant word – \textit{red} appearing in green – suggests a form of cognitive dissonance, the visual presence of the word competing with the very image it was purported to produce. (\textit{Figure 3.})

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{68} Galton, \textit{Inquiries}, 106-107. The phenomenon of color association had been investigated in the years prior, but Galton added significantly to the body of research. Galton cites two main studies, one by Professor Brühl of Vienna (1873) and an 1881 pamphlet by Messrs. Bleuler and Lehmann, one of whom experienced sound-color associations.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.,108.
\end{flushright}
In this and other instances, a mentally “pictured” sign could be found to be divorced from – and even outright contradict – the object, feeling or perception it signified. In *Inquiries*, Galton catalogued a number of similar accounts. Thus, as another respondent reported,

> Printed words have always had faces to me; they had definite expressions, and certain faces made me think of certain words. The words had *no* connection with these except sometimes by accident. The instances I give are few and ridiculous. … The word Blue blinks and looks silly, and turns to the right. The word Attention has the eyes greatly turned to the left. It is difficult to draw them properly because, like Alice’s “Cheshire cat,” which at times became a grin without a cat, these faces have expression without features. The expression of course [note the naïve phrase “of course.” – F.G.] depends greatly on those of the letters, which have likewise their faces and figures. All the little a’s turn their eyes to the left, this determines the eyes of Attention.’

[Galton’s note sic.]

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70 Ibid., 113-4.
For this woman, the “expression” of the words has nothing to do with their “dictionary” meaning, but rather becomes a literal “expression” of the letters. As she explains, the word itself has “no connection” with the picture, “except sometimes by accident.”

Neither respondent gives any indication that these associations are in any way problematic; and yet, these accounts nevertheless trouble an idea of reading premised upon the clear and untroubled transmission of a mental image. Here each word suggests not only its shared mental association, but carries the freight of “accidental” personification – a hidden register of signification entirely particular to the respondent.

In fact, these accounts were so contrary to common understanding that Galton undertook an extended study of his own reading practice. In an extraordinary series of self-experiments, Galton set out to document the images that words produced in his own mind. The breakfast-table questionnaire had been designed to test the ability to actively “realize” an image; here Galton examined the organic images that were prompted in the course of reading, without deliberate effort. Thus, in a number of trials, Galton tracked the time between the appearance of a word (presented to him on a card) and the moment when “a couple of ideas in direct association with the word had arisen in my mind.”

Once presented with a word, he recorded the resultant images – including those that were auditory, motile, or spatial: the sound of the word in his mental ear, for example, or even a “shiver of remembered cold.” Thus, the word “abasement” produced in him a series of images that included the bodily image of kneeling prostrate, the secondary awareness that one was being made to kneel, the word “David,” and even, in the case of an “accidental misreading,” a punning sense of “basement,” with the associated visual image of a

71 Ibid., 135.
72 Ibid., 142.
house about to be built. The long list of images each word prompted was odd and various – unpredictable even to Galton himself. More important, however, the associations could hardly be said to be common. Rather, Galton wrote, they were, as “accidental” as those of his other respondents – “for the most part due to my own unshared experiences, and the list of them would necessarily differ widely from that which another person would draw up who might repeat my experiments.” After completing the series of trials, Galton concluded his report thus:

Therefore one sees clearly, and I may say, measurably, how impossible it is in a general way for two grown-up persons to lay their minds side by side together in perfect accord. The same sentence cannot produce precisely the same effect on both, and the first quick impressions that any given word in it may convey, will differ widely in the two minds.

Galton here describes a gap between individuals – each bound by the particularity of his or her own mental landscape; but the gulf between people immediately extends to the relation between readers and writers, now divided by the knowledge that “the same sentence” could not be understood to produce “the same effect” in any two minds.

In Principles of Psychology (1890), William James demonstrated the potential disruption produced by such an insight. James, like Galton, had kept watch of his own mental space, making note of the “ideas which faintly hit through the mind at all times”; like Galton, he discovered in his own mind a number of unpredictable images, unrelated to the direct content of his thought. Indeed, James reported that he could perceive some of these images even at the very moment of his writing:

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 139.
75 Ibid., 140.
76 Ibid.
77 James, Principles, vol. 2, 83. The passage appears in direct reference to retinal afterimages, but, in a footnote, James adds mental imagery – visions like Goethe’s famous “phantasm of a flower,” that arose spontaneously in the
A horse’s head, a coil of rope, an anchor, are, for example, ideas which have come to me unsolicited whilst I have been writing these latter lines. They can often be explained by subtle links of association, often not at all. But I have not a few times been surprised, after noting some such idea, to find, on shutting my eyes, an after-image left on the retina by some bright or dark object recently looked at, and which had evidently suggested the idea. ‘Evidently,’ I say, because the general shape, size, and position of object thought-of and of after-image were the same, although the idea had details which the retinal image lacked. We shall probably never know just what part retinal after-images play in determining the train of our thoughts. Judging by my own experiences I should suspect it of being not insignificant. 

The passage describes two major sites of ambiguity in the communication between writer and reader. The first occurs between the writer and the page. The image of the horse’s head, which James reports to be in his mind “whilst I have been writing these latter lines,” is patently unrelated to the meaning of the those “latter lines” – a paragraph entirely about psychology, not about horses. As the passage itself illustrates, whether the object in James’s mind was a “horse’s head,” a “coil of rope,” or an “anchor,” the words cannot be understood to be literal translation of the writer’s mental imagery. James thus demonstrably debunks the idea that the writer’s work can be best described as a task of translating a “vision” into a set of sentences straightforwardly reflective of that “vision.”

Second, and perhaps more important, the reader is made aware of these dislocations in an appraisal of his or her own mental imagery. When reading those “latter lines,” the reader’s images (such as they were images at all) likely involved neither horses, rope, nor anchors, and thus can only be understood as starkly dissimilar to those which occupied the writer’s mind.

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78 Ibid., 84.
When faced with a set of sentences about psychology, the reader may have been generating images related to psychology (such as those might be), or, like James, may have been occupied with a set of stray associations generated by stray mental images “disconnected from the stream of thought” – or indeed entirely divorced from the words on the page.

As James clearly demonstrates here, conceiving of the imagination as a field of diverse imagery introduces opacity, contingency and chance into the transmission between mind and page, page and mind. James must of course here turn inward – to “my own experience.” But by calling attention to the inevitable discrepancy between the images in his mind and those in the mind of his reader, he also emphasizes his (and our) solipsism – two sides of the same problem. Indeed, the idea that words might be subject to unforeseen mental associations – determined by heredity (as for those with synaesthestic color images), by childhood experience (as with Galton’s word tests) or by contingency (as with “a horse’s head”), suggested that we were each isolated in our own reading, as in our own minds. If the value of writing was located in the possibility of “meeting” the mind of another person – “seeing” what they see – the mechanism by which this “meeting” occurred had become obscure.

And yet, to describe this as a crisis would be misleading. As I have suggested, the statistical study of the imagination upended older models of reading, introducing disjunction and opacity into the relation between reader and writer; but the same insights that disrupted stable models of understanding also suggested the potential for new avenues of expression, new effects produced in literature – or, to be more precise, in the reader.

Indeed, in the passage above, one finds what I take to be the hallmarks of a literary approach attentive to this new psychology. Notably, James here calls attention to the distinction between himself and his reader; in the moment of disruption, the reader becomes self-conscious
of his or her own reading practice – a form of psychological introspection that involves a return to a text already encountered. The demand to turn inward, to an awareness of one’s own individual mental field is, I will suggest, the signature gesture of these texts.

What distinguishes the authors I will address here is a shared belief in the reader’s imagination as a site of experience, an understanding made possible by the study of the mind’s eye. In James – as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mark Twain, and Helen Keller, all of whom were familiar with Galton’s study – I locate a literary tradition which stakes its meaning not in the correspondence between writer and reader, but rather, in the embodied feeling of the mind at work. These writers drew from psychology the premise that mental vision, like physical vision, had limits – limits defined by contingency (“The Yellow Wallpaper”), training (Pudd’nhead Wilson), physiology (The Principles of Psychology) and inheritance (The Story of My Life). While these limitations could be understood as constrictive, they also suggested the possibility that the mechanical act of reading could become an exercise in training for “real” life. For these authors, I will argue, the value of their writing was not to be found in reading about another person’s experience, but in providing a grammar of experience – a structure for perception that extended beyond the moment when the reader set the book aside.
III. Reading as Experience

The idea that the experience of a text might be a constitutive – or even crucial – part of a text’s meaning presents a conundrum for one who seeks to create a critical account that extends past any individual instance of reading. Indeed, experience has posed as knotty – and as stubborn – a problem as imagination in the aesthetic discourse of the past twenty years. In “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Michael Fried articulates the problem in what I take to be its starkest terms. Fried here writes against Robert Morris – a minimalist artist who claimed that the viewer’s experience of his work was in fact part of the work itself. Thus, in Morris’s words,

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.

Fried takes a position directly opposed to Morris; as Fried points out, a critical account of such an art would, by necessity, include the individual condition of the viewer – as well as all of the random, incidental and variable contingencies of the viewer’s body and the environment itself.

Fried writes,

It is, I think, worth remarking that ‘the entire situation’ means exactly that: all of it – including, it seems, the beholder’s body. There is nothing within his field of vision –

79 As Martin Jay has written, “to date, no consensus has been reached about what aesthetic experience really is or should be, what and how permeable its boundaries with other modes of experience are, and whether it should rest consent with its autonomous status or strive to assert its sovereignty over other types of experience” (Songs, 160). Martin Jay, Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).


81 Ibid.
nothing that he takes note of in any way — that declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question. On the contrary, for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts – not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.

For Fried, the idea that a work’s meaning could be summed up in the phrase “‘you just have to experience it,’” implies a kind of dead end to interpretation. Though Morris’s art, like all “literalist” art, stakes its claim to meaning upon the relation between “oneself” and the object, under “varying conditions,” it is hard to say how the quality of such a relation would ever be evaluated – or even, in fact, known. As Fried points out, it is hard to verify whether the implied experience is “wholly accessible to everyone,” or indeed, whether “one has really had it.”

The texts I examine in this dissertation, I will suggest, each present the reader with a form of “literalism” that provokes precisely this set of interpretive questions. Indeed, these texts foreground the reader’s act of reading in the most literal sense – the sense of the mechanical

82 Ibid., 155.
83 Ibid., 158. Walter Benn Michaels takes up this point in The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History (2004). The “1967” of Michaels’s title is drawn from the date of Fried’s publication of “Art and Objecthood” – an essay, which, Michaels writes, “marks the event that put the ‘post’ in postmodernism…” (Shape, 12).

For Michaels, there is a clear choice: one may care about “the subject position of the reader” – one that includes “the entire situation” – or one may care about the author’s intention; and to choose one implies the exclusion of the other (Ibid., 11). That is to say, if one were to take the reader’s experience into account – take into account the “eighty-six blank pages” included in a text, or the smudges on the page, or the feel of the binding – then one would also fundamentally end the possibility of literary critical interpretation. Experience is not a subject literary critics can agree upon – or in fact, even talk about. In the readings that follow, I hope to demonstrate that it is possible to take stock of things like typography, blank pages, and indentations while maintaining an understanding of the author’s intentionality. I take up this point most explicitly in my discussion of Helen Keller in chapter four.

Michaels’s earlier work, The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century (1987), also takes its departure from Fried; though the book has been roundly critiqued, it remains a critical touchstone in the account of late nineteenth-century American literature. Though I disagree with both Fried’s and Michaels’s theoretical and critical assessment of the works in question, I take their argument extremely seriously; indeed, if both Fried and Michaels have had perhaps an outsized effect on the understanding of American literature in this period, I believe it is because they accurately and honestly describe a persistent problematic in the account of the texts they address. Walter Benn Michaels, The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); ibid., The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

84 Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 158.
transformation of illegible marks into meaningful signs. My argument can be summed up in terms that echo Morris’s articulation of the role of the “new work” of art: in each case, I will argue, the reader is brought to an “awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work”; in the end, “one is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions.” It is in the space between the reader and the page – in the interaction with the book – that these authors perform their work.

Contrary to Fried, I hope to demonstrate that it is possible to create a meaningful account of what John Dewey described as “the refined and intensified forms of experience” that constitute these texts.85 As we shall see, these authors seek to structure – and even coerce – the reader’s experience in decidedly narrow and defined ways. In the pages that follow, my work will be to recover the rhetoric of these structures – a “grammar” of imaginative experience drawn from the study of the mind’s eye.

In this respect, my work continues that of Jennifer Fleissner and Jane F. Thrailkill – scholars who have already begun to bring the philosophical and psychological discourse of the period to bear upon American literature.86 Their study, like my own, emerges from what Thrailkill describes as “the shifting historical and cultural topography of the late nineteenth century, a period in which … fields of knowledge were in a process of uneven disaggregation and emergent institutionalization.”87 In her writing on this period, Thrailkill has worked to

87 Thrailkill, *Affecting*, 9. Thrailkill’s effort, in part, is aimed at remedying a longstanding blind spot in literary study; as C.P. Snow observed in 1959, the sciences and the humanities constituted “two cultures” – “two galaxies” even – and “between the two, a gulf of mutual incomprehension” (*Two Cultures*, 16; 4). As Thrailkill points out, the divide between the sciences and the humanities might also be understood as a divide between the body and the mind – one field stubbornly committed to “outward” signs of objective fact, the other stubbornly committed to “interior” states of thought and feeling. Though the ongoing nature of this “gulf” has been at times been called into question,
recover the meaning of a “series of specific affective responses – pity, fear, nervousness, pleasure, and wonder”; to these, Fleissner has added the story of “compulsion” and “obsession.” What remains to be accounted for, however, are structures of feeling that have neither a diagnosis, nor in fact a name, but that were nevertheless commonly recognizable as ordinary experiences of mental life.

The chapters are organized around four factors that can be said to shape these experiences, in each case drawn directly from the psychological discourse of imagination: contingency, training, physiology and inheritance. Rather than a thoroughgoing logic, what we find here is a set of common techniques, applied by various authors to suit their various ends. It should be noted that my argument in the pages that follow is intended to be limited to specific works, rather than whole oeuvres; in each case, however, I will argue that the literary critical “problem” that these “problem” texts have presented can be understood as a mark of the author’s engagement with the reader’s imaginative experience.

In my first chapter, I read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s classic short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) as a tale that is, quite literally, about wallpaper. Though the sinister quality of

as Thralkill writes, there remains a tendency to “assert a disciplinary mind/body divide: to affirm an implicit division between rhetorical and cultural analysis on the one hand (the modus operandi of scholars in the humanities) and empirical and practical inquiry on the other (the province of investigators in the sciences)” (Affecting, 25-26).

In recent years, the emergent field of cognitive literary studies has sought to bridge this divide. In Lisa Zunshine’s introduction to a recently published collection of essays on the subject, she defines the field: “The goal of the cognitive cultural project,” she writes, “is to understand the evolving relationship between two immensely complex, historically situated systems – the human mind and cultural artifacts, such as novels, poems, or paintings – and not to merely use such artifacts to illustrate a particular scientific hypothesis about on particular feature of human cognition” (Introduction, 3). Yet, though the mission of cognitive cultural studies may be to “destabilize the old division between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’” (Ibid., 2), it seems, rather often, that the “destabilizing” of this “old division” amounts to a reinforcement – the one “nature” (in the form of neuroscience) being “applied” to those artifacts of “nurture”: books, paintings and poems.

But by looking at a period in which “cognitive science” itself emerged, it becomes possible perhaps to re-frame question. At stake in the description of what the imagination is, and how it works, is also a description of what counts as art and what counts as science; what counts as the mind and what counts as the body – or to put it another way, a description of what cultural artifacts are. Indeed, the very distinction between “the human mind and cultural artifacts” is one that William James and John Dewey go to extraordinary lengths to dispute. C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures, 1959 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

88 Thralkill, Affecting, 26-7; Fleissner, Women, 9.
the wallpaper is almost always read as symbolic, the hallucinatory effect of staring at a complex optical pattern was highly theorized by the psychology of the time. Gilman, I argue, draws from this discourse in order to give the reader a similarly hallucinatory – and likewise unpleasant – experience; in this way, the reader can be made to share in the narrator’s affliction, and perhaps also find a stay against it.

In my second chapter, I turn to Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1893-4), published only one year later. As many readers have noted, though the slave Roxana is described as fair-skinned in the beginning of the book, throughout the novel, Twain himself seems to “forget” this fact – a “forgetfulness” that leads to many of the baffling racial inversions of the text. I argue, however, that Twain quite explicitly leads the reader to ignore Roxana’s stated appearance, drawing the reader into an imaginative error – one that must be repeatedly corrected. Twain calls attention to the moments in which Roxana is transformed from black-to-white, and back again, instructing the reader to observe his or her own mind in the process of a racial double-take. Twain thus provides his reader with a form of mental exercise – a first step towards re-training the mind, one crucial in Reconstruction America.

In my third chapter, I address William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890). Though James has often been criticized for his writing style, I argue that the many “Pandora’s boxes” to be found in his work serve a profoundly important rhetorical function. In order to describe something that could not be put into words, James relied upon the one thing he could count on: the reader’s position as a reader. By repeatedly calling attention to the reader’s-act-of-reading-while-reading, I argue, James sought to induce a small headache of interpretation, one that would instruct the reader in his or her own participation in the process of interpretation itself. For James, the necessarily familiar act of transforming “dead” marks on a page into their “living”
counterparts provided the reader with a tiny – but crucial – encounter with the mechanism by which all reality was constructed.

I conclude with a discussion of Helen Keller’s 1903 autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. As a child, Keller was accused of plagiarism; the charge that her language was always “second-hand” haunted the assessment of her writing throughout her career. Keller often wrote of things she could know directly: the silence of snow, the color of a rose, the reflection of fireworks upon the water; her descriptions of these experiences, though accurate, seemed to her critics to exhibit an “illegitimate use of imagination” in their evocation of sights and sounds that were patently unavailable to her. Keller, I will argue, draws upon this very feeling of “illegitimacy” in order to produce what William James described as a “rat trap” – a small disruption of the interpretive process. In *The Story of My Life*, Keller uses this technique to bring the reader to a repeated experience of the limits of the imagination – a “verge of mind” that, for Keller, as for William James, marked our most profound spiritual encounters.

I have adapted a line from Keller’s second book, *The World I Live In* (1908), as the title of this dissertation; this project began as an attempt to provide an account of Keller’s writing that faithfully described what I take to be its signature effect. In a 1957 essay on “Recent Abstract Painting,” Meyer Schapiro quoted a passage from Keller’s book. “‘How does the straight line feel?’” Keller was asked. She replied:

> It feels, as I suppose it looks, straight — a dull thought drawn out endlessly. It is unstraight lines, or many straight and curved lines together, that are eloquent to the touch. They appear and disappear, are now deep, now shallow, now broken off or lengthened or swelling. They rise and sink beneath my fingers, they are full of sudden starts and pauses, and their variety is inexhaustible and wonderful.*

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“Her sensitiveness,” Schapiro writes, “shames us whose open eyes fail to grasp these qualities of form.”\textsuperscript{90} I have prefaced each of these chapters with a work of American art that, I hope, finds resonance in the subsequent pages – that in some way helps my reader attune to the nameless “feeling of the line” which I attempt to trace there. Throughout, my effort will be to recover a rhetorical meaning for experiences that many readers have noted, but that have nevertheless been understood as contingent – or even contradictory – to the central message of the text: the claustrophobia of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the horror of \textit{Pudd’nhead Wilson}, the expansive clarity of \textit{Principles of Psychology}, the abrupt “starts” in \textit{Story of My Life}. In doing so, I will have to ask my own reader to do some work with me, to undertake the task of introspection – to read scenes more than once, to read long block quotes that cannot be summarized – as their \textit{feeling}, I will argue, is often their meaning. In the end, I will have to hope that my reader has had a like experience.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
Brice Marden, The Sisters (1991-3)
CHAPTER I. CONTINGENCY
Reading “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Francis Galton included many illustrations in *Inquiries Into Human Faculty*, copied from drawings that had been submitted in response to the breakfast-table questionnaire. But he was particularly eager to present the report from one respondent, Dr. James Key – a man gifted with extraordinarily powerful color associations. “Dr. Key’s elaborate drawings and ample explanations, to which I am totally unable to do justice in a moderate space, are the most full and striking of any I have received,” Galton wrote.¹

Like many of Galton’s respondents, Key associated colors with vowel sounds, though with far greater subtlety than most. The different ‘A’ sounds in “fame,” “can,” “charm” and “all,” for example, each produced a distinct shade of brown in Key’s mind.² Key’s drawings occupied much of the color plate, where Galton reproduced Key’s alphabet in an “elaborately-colored diagram.”³ There, Galton printed “three lines of words such as they appear to him”: pure strips of alternating colors that “spelled” the words “Francis Galton,” “London” and “Visualization.”⁴ (Figure 1.)

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² Key speculated that the letter “O” was experienced as white because of the open space it included. “I” was black for the opposite reason (Ibid., 110).
³ Ibid., 107.
⁴ Ibid., 110.
For Key, verbal sounds were associated with patterns as well as colors. Thus, in the alphabet that Galton provided, the letter ‘G’ appears as diagonal stripes of yellow and black. But these associations, Key reported, also ran in reverse. Random patterns and colors that appeared in the environment, Key said, also at times represented words to him. Indeed, Key had collected “scraps of various patterns of wallpaper” and had sent them to Galton, “together with the word that the color of the several patterns suggested to him.”\(^5\) Galton reprinted these “Exercises in Translating Wall-paper patterns” and included them in the text. (Figure 2.) On the plate, the words “GRIND” and “GRAND” are each represented in similar but subtly distinctive patterns of brown, yellow and red. The word “AGUE” seems to have appeared in a border pattern of blue and yellow; “AGREE” in another corner of the same paper.

“The patterns,” Galton wrote, “are to him like words in poetry, which call up associations that any substituted word of a like dictionary meaning would fail to do.”\(^6\) Though this may have seemed like a remarkable assertion, it was fully continuous with Galton’s other reports. If, for some, words came associated with colors and textures, it was not strange to imagine that colors and textures could also be read back as words. Indeed, how else could one describe even ordinary letters – a pattern of marks set against a background?

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.
Figure 1. Dr. James Key’s color associations, from Francis Galton, *Inquiries* (1883).
Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s classic story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), takes its departure from this psychological discourse. Ever since the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s landmark Madwoman in the Attic (1979), the story has become a touchstone text in a feminist criticism that aligns female creativity against the male medical establishment. But though these readings generally locate the narrator – and Gilman – against the forces of scientific treatment and observation, Gilman, I will argue, is here best understood as an agent of science herself. Indeed, as we shall see, Gilman adapts both the themes – and, more crucially, the techniques – of late nineteenth-century psychology in her evocation of the wallpaper.

As “The Yellow Wallpaper” begins, the narrator – also figured as the writer of story itself

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7 As Jane Thrailkill observes, “the tale has, in recent decades, elicited a stunning amount of critical attention from scholars who, reading it within a Freudian framework, see it as an allegorical tale of rebellion against a repressive atmosphere” (Affecting, 118). Jane Thrailkill, Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
– has been diagnosed with a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency.” The narrator’s husband, a physician, advises her to rest, and she takes up residence in a “big, airy room” at the top of the house, covered in yellow wallpaper. Though the story famously produces what Mary Jacobus has called a “maze of sign reading,” the plot, such as it is, is simple: A woman stares at wallpaper and, in a kind of gothic transformation, becomes the woman that she perceives trapped behind the pattern. “The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough,” the narrator writes. “But the pattern is torturing.”

Gilman’s story was, she said, “founded on fact.” Only a few years prior to writing “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman herself had been treated for neurasthenia; Silas Weir Mitchell, a prominent physician, prescribed the “rest cure” for Gilman, calling for isolation and prohibiting any type of work – including that of reading and writing. In her essay, “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” (1913), Gilman explains that the story was intended as an effort to intervene in the treatment of women like herself: “The real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways.”

In at least one instance, “The Yellow Wallpaper” seems to have worked. In her autobiography, Gilman recounted the case of a woman who recovered thanks to the publication of the story. An editor at New England Magazine wrote to her, she said, asking if the story was

8 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 1892, in Herland and The Yellow Wallpaper, 163-181 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 163. Notably, on the first page of the story, the narrator complains not of her husband’s diagnosis, but of his lack of one: “You see, he does not believe I am sick!” (Ibid.).
9 Ibid., 165.
13 Ibid.
based upon fact:

Later he explained that he had a friend who was in similar trouble, even to hallucinations about her wallpaper, and whose family were treating her as in the tale, that he had not dared show them my story till he knew that it was true, in part at least, and that when he did they were so frightened by it, so impressed by the clear implication of what ought to have been done, that they changed her wallpaper and the treatment of the case – and she recovered!  

The woman’s treatment changed – but Gilman is not surprised that the woman’s wallpaper should have needed to change also. Indeed, while the story is often read symbolically and allegorically, Gilman, by her own account, seems to have intended it to be read – at least in substantial part – literally. As the narrator reports near the end of the story, “It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, – that perhaps it is the paper!” The proposition of this chapter is that perhaps in fact it is.

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15 In the critical literature that has surrounded “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator’s transformation has been explained with reference to a variety of illnesses, most notably post-partum depression. Indeed, in medical journals, Gilman’s story has at times been treated as an actual case study. See for example, Jerome M. Schneck, “S. Weir Mitchell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and Capgras’ Syndrome,” *New York State Journal of Medicine* 91, no. 10 (October 1991): 445-9. On post-partum depression, see Dana Seitler, “Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Regeneration Narratives,” *American Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 2003): 61-88.

I. The Wallpaper Effect

In 1884, one year after the publication of Inquiries Into Human Faculty, Francis Galton produced a series of “observations and inferences” on the topic of free will, an investigation that grew directly out of his studies of mental imagery.17 On the subject of free will, Galton noted, philosophers had rarely, if ever, “watched the operations of their own minds,” relying instead on assumption and inference.18 The results of the breakfast-table questionnaire, however, led Galton to conclude that the researcher ought to consider his own mental landscape as the first field of observation. Thus, in a typically dogged undertaking, Galton resolved upon his own grueling “course of introspective inquiry.”19 For six weeks, he observed his own actions minutely; whenever he found himself “engaged in a feat of what fairly be called Free-will,” he noted the circumstances and “wrote down an account of the whole transaction.”20 The results of this work confirmed the details of the reports he had collected in his study of mental imagery, particularly in the “startling spontaneity” with which images – and their associated ideas – arose in the mind.21 Searching for an explanation for these “sudden presentations” of images, Galton drew upon a perceptual phenomenon often encountered when looking at wallpaper:

I have elsewhere pointed out a close and instructive analogy between the process by which completely shaped ideas probably arise, and that by which ‘fire-faces,’ as they are sometimes named, are certainly formed. I mean by that word those well defined faces, landscapes or other pictures, that most persons are apt to trace in the red hot coals of the fire, in the clouds, or in the patterns of wall paper. A part of the mind, unconsciously, and

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 411.
frequently against subsequent judgment and will, is found to have been struck by some chance lines or sequence of points that serve to suggest a picture. It has ignored everything that does not conform to the unconsciously suggested image and has fancifully supplied whatever is deficient.\textsuperscript{22}

In such instances, the “face” was not assembled over time, but emerged suddenly, starting “before the consciousness in its perfected shape.”\textsuperscript{23} The effect was not unique to fire gazing; rather, Galton observed, “all our thoughts” arose with a “similar spontaneity” to the visions induced at fireside – the result of an imaginative process that was “quicker than thought.”\textsuperscript{24}

The sudden materialization of a face in the “red hot coals of the fire,” “the clouds” or in “the patterns of wall paper” was a well-known perceptual effect of the time. James Sully’s book, \textit{Illusions: A Psychological Study} (1881), a comprehensive account of the imagination’s role in perception, opened with a description of “the play of fancy which leads to a detection of animal and other forms in the clouds.”\textsuperscript{25} As Sully noted, the phrase the “mind’s eye” had been coined by Shakespeare, used in reference to the ghost of Hamlet’s father:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Hamlet}: My father! – methinks I see my father. \\
\textit{Horatio}: Where, my lord? \\
\textit{Hamlet}: In my mind’s eye, Horatio.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} I. ii. 184-186. This is not in fact the first use of the phrase in the play, though it is the reference most often cited. The phrase actually appears in the first scene of the first act, in reference to the ghost himself:
\textit{Barnardo}: Well may it sort that this portentous figure \\
Comes armed through our watch; so like the king \\
That was and is the question of these wars. \\
\textit{Horatio}: A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye. (I. i. 109-112)
It was perhaps not surprising then that Hamlet’s practice of discovering “forms” (camel, weasel, whale) in the clouds should be taken as the key example of the function of the “mind’s eye” in ordinary perception.27 William James and Joseph Jastrow likewise included a discussion of the phenomenon in their psychologies of imagination.28 “Illustrations of ‘seeing’ with the mind’s eye are not far to seek,” Jastrow wrote.29 “Wherever the beauties and conformations of natural scenery invite the eye of man, does he discover familiar forms and faces; the forces of nature have rough-hewn the rocks, but the human eye detects and often creates the resemblances. … The flickering fire furnishes a fine background for the activity of the mind’s eye, and against this it projects the forms and fancies which the leaping flames and the burning embers from time to time suggest.”30

The reference had perhaps originally been Shakespeare’s, but by the late nineteenth century, the process of discovering “familiar forms and faces” in rocks, clouds or “burning embers” had been thoroughly theorized by introspective psychology. By way of explaining this phenomenon, Sully, James, Jastrow and Galton each drew upon a familiar perceptual effect produced by a series of alternating lines, or any regular pattern. In his essay on free will, Galton included a diagram in the margin, upon which the reader could make an experiment – a grid of dots arranged at regular intervals. (Figure 3.) The dots presented a field for what Sully called the

27 The relevant passage occurs in the third act:
*Hamlet*: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
*Lord Polonius*: By the mass, and ’tis like a camel, indeed.
*Hamlet*: Methinks it is like a weasel.
*Lord Polonius*: It is backed like a weasel.
*Hamlet*: Or like a whale?
*Lord Polonius*: Very like a whale. (III. ii. 368-373)


29 Jastrow, *Fact and Fable*, 276.

30 Ibid., 276-7.
“play of fancy”; here the reader would be able to produce a “fire-face” directly, introspecting upon the process and observing the mechanism for him- or herself:

Figure 3. From Francis Galton, “Free-Will: Observations and Inferences” (1884).

The grid in this case represented a simplified version of coals or clouds. As Galton explained, it was possible to perceive the dots in multiple groupings: “We may view them in lines that are either horizontal, sloping from left to right or from right to left, or vertical.”31 Taking the dots as groups of four was somehow perceptibly different from the effect of taking the dots as groups of nine, twelve, or sixteen.32 The effect was similar to that of looking at the pattern of a chessboard. Jastrow proposed a similar experiment with a series of black-and-white stripes. (Figure 4.) One could try to view the pattern “with the conception that the black is the pattern to be seen and the white the background” or conversely, with “the white as the pattern against a black background.”33

32 Try to move through the grid by grouping it in these units:

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33 Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 283.
The imaginative function that allowed one to move between groupings of the grid or aspects of the pattern was likewise understood to be responsible for the creation of faces in the fire. As Jastrow explained, the pattern illustrated the way in which “a single outward impression changes its character according as it is viewed as representing one thing or another.” In a general way we see the same thing all the time, and the image on the retina does not change,” he wrote. But, as “we view it with a different mental conception of what the figure represents, it assumes a different aspect, and to our mental eye becomes quite a different thing.” The effect was the same, whether contemplating a pattern of dots, stripes, or burning coals. Though the dots themselves did not materially change, the reader could nevertheless shuttle between different

34 Ibid., 282.
35 Ibid., 283.
36 Ibid., 282-3.
perceptions of the same field, moving between “four,” “nine” and “twelve” at will: camel, weasel, whale.

Certain kinds of perceptual objects more readily offered themselves for this kind of “interpretation” than others. As Sully explained, “the indistinct and indefinite shapes of the masses of rock, clouds, or glowing coals offer an excellent field for creative fancy, and a person of lively imagination will discover endless forms in what, to an unimaginative eye, is a formless waste.”37 The list of “indefinite” objects regularly included rocks, clouds, and coals – but also, notably, wallpaper. The alternating lines of a complex pattern offered up the same prospect as that of a shifting fire – an especially rich opportunity for the imaginative mind. As Sully observed, “many of my readers probably share in my power of variously interpreting the relative position of bands or stripes on fabrics such as wall-papers, according to wish. I find that it is possible to view now this stripe or set of stripes as standing out in relief upon the others as a ground, now these others as advancing out of the first as a background.”38 The perceptual mechanism that allowed one to move between “relief” and “ground” was also that which produced fire-faces. “A somewhat similar choice of interpretation offers itself in looking at elaborate decorative patterns,” Sully wrote. “When we strongly imagine any number of details to be elements of one figure, they seem to become so; and a given detail positively appears to alter in character according as it is viewed as an element of a more or less complex figure.”39

In Principles of Psychology (1890), William James similarly described what might be called the “wallpaper effect.” In a footnote, he quoted a passage from Hermann Lotze (the ellipses are James’s own):

37 Sully, Illusions, 100.
38 Ibid., 98.
39 Ibid.
‘In quietly lying and contemplating a wall-paper pattern, sometimes it is the ground, sometimes the design, which is clearer and consequently comes nearer. … Arabesques of monochromic many-convoluted lines now strike us as composed of one, now of another connected linear system, and all without any intention on our part. … Often it happens in revery that when we stare at a picture, suddenly some one of its features will be lit up with especial clearness, although neither its optical character nor its meaning discloses any motive for such an arousal of the attention.’

James provided a figure – a six-pointed star – as an illustration of Lotze’s account. (Figure 5.) Like Galton’s field of dots or Jastrow’s stripes, the star could be perceived in multiple, but distinct ways. The effect that Lotze described, James explained, was “beautifully seen in Moorish patterns,” but the “simple diagram” he inserted “shows it well. We see it sometimes as two large triangles superposed, sometimes as a hexagon with angles spanning its sides, sometimes as six small triangles stuck together at their corners.” By moving between the star’s various “aspects” – now “two large triangles,” now a “hexagon” – the reader could observe the shifts that Lotze described for him- or herself.

Figure 5. From William James, Principles of Psychology (1890).

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41 Ibid.

42 This diagram will become extremely important to my discussion of William James in chapter three.
Read in this context, I will argue, “The Yellow Wallpaper” can be understood as a somewhat precise dramatization of the perceptual effect produced by staring at a complex pattern. Gilman places her narrator in a position parallel to that of Lotze – “quietly lying and contemplating a wall-paper pattern.” Indeed, the “arabesques of monochromic many-convoluted lines” that Lotze describes almost precisely echo Gilman’s description of the yellow paper, in which “the outside pattern is a florid arabesque.”

In fact, throughout the story, the narrator’s description of the wallpaper presents a startlingly consistent account of the perceptual effect produced by a field of dots, a six-pointed star, or any figure that might shift between “ground” and “design.” As the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” tells it, the problem of the paper is that it represents two competing aspects:

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes – a kind of ‘debased Romanesque’ with delirium tremens – go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

Though the paper itself does not change, it appears different “looked at in one way” than when “looked at” in another – one set of “curves and flourishes” coming forward as the others recede. Gilman’s narrator puzzles over the question of ground and relief, lying awake for “hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.” The “outside pattern,” she complains, competes with a “dim sub-pattern.”

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44 Ibid., 170.
46 Ibid., 174.
she repeats, “this wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one. … But in the places where it isn’t faded and where the sun is just so – I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.”

Though the narrator may perhaps seem unreliable, Gilman’s description of the narrator’s experience remains firmly grounded in the ordinary facts of perceptual psychology throughout. Thus, for example, the narrator remarks upon the change that comes upon the wallpaper at night:

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window – I always watch for that first long, straight ray – it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

By moonlight – the moon shines in all night when there is a moon – I wouldn’t know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn’t realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

Color perception was known to change with different forms of light – the healthy human eye does not in fact perceive any color by moonlight. As Galton noted, in Inquiries, we are each literally color-blind at times, though very few of us ever have occasion to notice:

We do not suspect ourselves to be yellow-blind by candle light, because we enjoy

47 Ibid., 169.
48 Ibid., 174.
49 “Though the full moon appears big and bright, sunlight is half a million times brighter. A terrestrial landscape bathed in moonlight has a ghostly monochrome appearance because the scene is not bright enough to trigger all of the color receptors in the human eye.” Peter Grego, The Moon and How To Observe It (London: Springer, 2005), 102.
pictures in the evening nearly or perhaps quite as much as in the day time; yet we observe that a yellow primrose laid on the white table-cloth wholly loses its colour by candlelight and becomes white as a snowdrop.\textsuperscript{50}

In this context, it is possible to imagine that the wallpaper does in fact have two overlaid patterns, just as the narrator describes: a dominant pattern and a “sub-pattern,” the top forms disappearing by candlelight. Even the narrator’s odd and repeated description of the “yellow smell” – a smell “like the color of the paper” – might be attributed to synaesthetic color association, such as those that Galton documented.\textsuperscript{51}

As the story progresses, the perceived shifts in the wallpaper – foreground to background – prompt a kind of hallucination. And in this respect too, Gilman’s account remains grounded in the period’s perceptual psychology. As James, Jastrow, and Sully each took pains to elaborate, the simple perceptual mechanism that governed the production of fire-faces was responsible for any number of illusions and apparitions.\textsuperscript{52} In order to effect the change between “six small triangles” and “hexagon,” William James observed, we need only imagine “in advance the form we wish to see.”\textsuperscript{53} The marks on the page remained static, of course, but the included figures nevertheless seemed to materially change – a transformation produced entirely by the mind of the perceiver: “We\textit{ conceive} one set of lines as object, the other as background, and forthwith the first set becomes the set we \textit{see}.”\textsuperscript{54} The imagination of the desired image in this case produced the desired perception.

\textsuperscript{50} Galton,\textit{ Inquiries}, 31-32.

\textsuperscript{51} Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Barnes & Noble, 176.

\textsuperscript{52} Hamlet’s cloud-gazing is associated with both ghosts and insanity. It is possible that Shakespeare was an extraordinary observer of perception; it is also possible that the psychologists I am discussing drew this association \textit{from} Shakespeare.

\textsuperscript{53} James,\textit{ Principles}, vol. 1, 442.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Indeed, a lively mental image could at times seem to conjure its own reality. The effect was observable in a grid of dots or in geometric patterns, but was most directly manifest in drawings of hollow boxes or stairs. James, Sully, and Jastrow all included similar diagrams in their texts. (Figures 6, 7 and 8.) As Sully explained, a hollow box could be perceived as either “a truncated pyramid,” or conversely, “the interior of a cooking vessel.” “It is found that when we vividly imagine that the drawing is that of a convex or concave surface, we see it to be so, with all the force of a complete perception.” The effect apparent in wallpaper patterns or in these boxes held true in any instance in which “the present sense-signs are ambiguous.” “Here we obviously have a choice of interpretation. And it is found that, in these cases, what we see depends very much on what we wish to see.”

“These examples,” Sully wrote, “show what force belongs to a vivid preconception, if this happens to fit only very roughly the impression of the moment.” Though the ability to discover a face in the fire was understood to be a quite ordinary aspect of perception, the potential destabilization here was apparent; the idea that “what we see” might depend upon “what we wish to see” suggested the possibility of an unfettered imaginative capacity. If a box could be concave or convex depending on the disposition of the viewer; if a star could be “triangles” or a “hexagon”; if a mass of rock could resolve into the perception of a face, one

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55 The ability to shuttle between the foreground and background of a geometric pattern, or between two “aspects” of a grid was a function of pre-perception, a term used to describe the way in which a “vivid preconception” might influence the interpretation of a visual field (Sully, Illusions, 99). I will discuss this effect further in my third chapter.

56 Ibid., 96.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 95.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 99.
ception. The least disposition to see it in the other way will suffice to reverse the interpretation. Thus, in the following drawing, the reader can easily see at

![Figure 5](image)

will something answering to a truncated pyramid, or to the interior of a cooking vessel.

Similarly, in the accompanying figure of a trans-

**Figure 6.** From James Sully, *Illusions* (1881).

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7.** From William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890).

**Figure 7.** — This drawing may be viewed as the representation of a book standing on its half-opened covers as seen from the back of the book; or as the inside view of an open book showing the pages.

**Figure 8.** From Joseph Jastrow, *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900).
could likewise find hidden “objects” in all kinds of perceptual fields – objects entirely particular to the perceiver.  

Jastrow, for his part, included some “extreme instances of this process,” including the seeming apparition of ghosts:

The whitewashed tree or post that momentarily startles us in a dark country lane takes on the guise that expectancy gives it. The mental predisposition here becomes the dominant factor, and the timid see as ghosts what their more sturdy companions recognize as whitewashed posts. Such experiences we ascribe to the action of suggestion and imagination – the cloud ‘that’s almost in shape like a camel,’ or ‘like a weasel,’ or ‘like a whale.’

Indeed, as James explained, an entire “class of illusions” could be attributed to the process that made it possible to perceive camels in clouds (or women in wallpaper) – occasions upon which “we perceive a wrong object because our mind is full of the thought of it at the time.” The hunter seems to shoot at a woodcock – the bird he has been searching for – but finds that he has instead shot a thrush. “As with game,” James wrote, “so with enemies, ghosts, and the like. Anyone waiting in a dark place and expecting or fearing strongly a certain object will interpret any abrupt sensation to mean that object’s presence.” Indeed, James noted, the effect was responsible for the success of “the so-called ‘materializing séances’ which fraudulent mediums give.”

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61 In *Illusions*, Sully included a long list of misperceptions that could be attributed to the same effect. To take only a few: When walking in a cathedral, for example, we are liable to take any “faint hollow sound” to be the sound of an organ; we leave a train and mistake a stranger for a friend we hope to see; we decide to take the theater as a “semblance of life” rather than focus upon its rude mechanics.


63 James, *Principles*, vol. 2, 94.

64 Ibid., 95

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 97. Sully and Jastrow also made the link with séances.
spirit of his sister, mother, wife, or child, and falls upon his neck.”\textsuperscript{67} In these cases, James observed, “the darkness, the previous forms, and the expectancy have so filled his mind with premonitory images that it is no wonder he perceives what is suggested.”\textsuperscript{68}

In Gilman’s story, the “formless sort of figure” that emerges from the wallpaper has all the qualities of a similar perceptual “illusion” – a construction of the mind cut from a shifting and unstable visual field. In \textit{Inquiries}, Galton described a comparable scenario in detail:

I will begin with illusions. What is the process by which they are established? There is no simpler way of understanding it than by trying, as children often do, to see ‘faces in the fire,’ and to carefully watch the way in which they are first caught. Let us call to mind at the same time the experience of past illnesses, when the listless gaze wandered over the patterns on the wall-paper and the shadows of the bed-curtains, and slowly evoked the appearance of faces and figures that were not easily laid again. The process of making the faces is so rapid in health that it is difficult to analyze it without the recollection of what took place more slowly when we were weakened by illness. The first essential element in their construction is, I believe, the smallness of the area covered by the glance at any instant, so that the eye has to travel over a long track before it has visited every part of the object towards which the attention is directed generally. It is as with a plough, that must travel many miles before the whole of a small field can be tilled, but with this important difference – the plough travels methodically up and down in parallel furrows; the eye wanders in devious curves, with abrupt bends…. In constructing fire-faces it seems to me that the eye in its wanderings tends to follow a favorite course, and it especially dwells upon the marks that happen to coincide with that course. It feels its way, easily diverted by associations based on what has just been noticed, until at last, by the unconscious practice of a system of ‘trial and error,’ it hits upon a track that will suit – one that is

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. In his \textit{Briefer Course}, James goes on to say that “these fraudulent ‘séances’ would furnish most precious documents to the psychology of perception, if they could only be satisfactorily inquired into” (\textit{Briefer}, 305). James was sympathetic to the idea of séances, and did not discount the possibility that the apparitions they conjured were, at least at times, real. William James, \textit{Psychology: Briefer Course}, 1892, in \textit{Writings 1878-1899}, edited by Gerald E. Myers, 1-444 (New York: The Library of America, 1992).
easily run over and that strings together accidental marks in a way that happens to form a well-connected picture. This fancy picture is then dwelt upon; all that is incongruous with it becomes disregarded, while all deficiencies in it are supplied by the fantasy.\textsuperscript{69}

Galton’s phrasing here could be directly inserted into Gilman’s story: during a period of illness, the narrator allows her “listless gaze” to “wander over the patterns on the wall-paper” slowly identifying “faces and figures” that are “not easily laid again.” Gilman’s story describes precisely the same process – one in which the eye “wander[s] in devious curves, with abrupt bends,” following “a favorite course.” The narrator explains her daily practice: “I start, we’ll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.”\textsuperscript{70} The pattern “is dull enough to confuse the eye in following … and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.”\textsuperscript{71}

Gilman’s contemporary readers hardly missed this connection. Take, for example, one reviewer’s summary of the story’s plot:

In his long illness Alphonse Daudet suffered from nerves. He changed his room because he thought a figure on the frieze looked like the face of a vicious man. Others have remarked that certain quilt patterns or wall paper patterns were calculated to drive one crazy. It is known that they suggest strange fancies, which in the sick become positive delusions. This is the motive of Mrs. Stetson’s [Gilman’s] story. A woman with nerves, the wife of a doctor and a young mother, relates the increasing influence over her mind of a complicated yellow wall paper pattern. At first she is both amused and distressed, but gradually she gives rein to her imagination, and at last develops a case of insanity.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{69} Galton, \textit{Inquiries}, 123-4.

\textsuperscript{70} Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Barnes & Noble, 170.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.,165.

\textsuperscript{72} Unsigned review of “The Yellow Wallpaper” from \textit{The American} (Philadelphia), June 10 [?] 1899, in \textit{Charlotte
From this vantage, Gilman’s narrator can be located in a rich literary lineage: as Sully noted, the act of looking for figures in clouds, coals, or wallpaper, had been “rightly made use of by Shakespeare as a mark of incipient mental aberration in Hamlet.”

To understand the story in this way critically changes the meaning of the narrator’s illness. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is often read as a parable of therapeutic language: the narrator simply needs to be “heard” in order to be cured. And yet, Gilman’s description of the narrator’s perceptions does not suggest that she can be “cured” merely by telling. Indeed, the “cure” for the narrator’s malady is not narrative, but environmental. Gilman clearly indicates that the narrator’s husband ought to listen to her account, just as Weir Mitchell needed to listen to his patients; but this might simply mean “listening” in the conversational sense – as when the narrator suggests white-washing the walls, or taking another room in the house.

And yet, while this reading may re-orient our understanding of the narrator’s position, it does not yet “solve” what I take to be the key problem of the story itself. As many readers of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have observed, the story in some way resists definitive critical interpretation. As Jane Thrailkill has written, the reader’s “attention is uncomfortably, unresolvedly divided by the story’s lack of closure.” In the end, we are “left to puzzle over the story’s antinomies.” “Gilman’s agitated readers,” she writes,

recognized that the attempt to consolidate the story’s unresolvable elements into a coherent narrative was impossible; many of them, appropriately, turned away frustrated from the tale’s discomfitting pages. Literary critics, with our tendency to transform a

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74 Thrailkill, *Affecting*, 143.

75 Ibid.
fractured text into a coherent one, have tended to miss the point. Taken together, however, our accounts of Gilman’s tale have in a sense produced our own, unending series of journal entries: in the delightfully apt statement of a recent scholar, ‘Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s best-known story continues to elicit more than enough paper to decorate a fairly large room.’

In her account of nineteenth-century naturalism, Jennifer Fleissner likewise remarks upon the critical productivity of the story. As she points out, the literary criticism around “The Yellow Wallpaper” has engaged in an attempt “to make the pattern work, once and for all” – and in doing so, has taken “up a position parallel” to Gilman’s narrator. “Most feminist readers of Gilman’s story,” Fleissner writes, “have presumed along with the story’s heroine that the meaning of womanhood lies somewhere in the wallpaper’s hidden content – and have thus read that content over and over with variations, just as she does.”

Thrailkill understands this to be an outcome of which Gilman would approve: “one can acknowledge that the cottage industry of Gilman scholarship (unlike the ‘work’ of the poor woman in Gilman’s story) has helped to translate agitation into institutional change, making a

76 Ibid., 143-44.
78 Fleissner, Women, 70. In the story’s relatively short history as an object of literary criticism, “The Yellow Wallpaper” has borne a remarkable number of readings, all of which may be “discovered” in the patterns of the wallpaper. In his 2010 essay, “Jack London’s ‘To Build a Fire’: How Not To Read Naturalist Fiction,” Donald Pizer has critiqued precisely this tendency in the literary critical approach to naturalism. “The critic,” he writes, “openly or (more often) silently ignores the plain meaning of the text as a whole and instead constructs by means of forced readings of specific narrow elements of the text a cultural or ideological meaning related to his or her cultural or ideological preoccupation” (“Jack,” 226). This approach begins first by assuming that texts may express things of which the “author is largely unaware”; second by assuming that texts are “unstable” and can bear multiple meanings at once (Ibid.). “The Yellow Wallpaper,” I have argued, presents a remarkable surface for readings in precisely this vein. Gilman’s highly “unstable” text seems to be nothing if not “automated” – even authorless. Donald Pizer, “Jack London’s ‘To Build a Fire’: How Not To Read Naturalist Fiction,” Philosophy and Literature 34, no. 1 (April 2010): 218-227.
79 Fleissner, Women, 69.
place for women and women’s scholarship within the academy.” And yet, I will argue, Gilman’s “work” in the story was not intended for a future audience of literary critics; nor is it “anticipatory” of future developments in aesthetic theory. If the story, then as now, has seemed to be an “automatic” engine for interpretation – “unending,” “discomfiting” – this is because it is in fact designed to be one. Indeed, contrary to Thrailkill’s assertion of the latent or symptomatic nature of these effects, it has hardly been noted that the interpretive – and attendant literary critical – problems produced by Gilman’s story were explicitly theorized by the psychology of the time.

Though the wallpaper effect is dramatized within the world of the novel, the structure of the story itself, I will suggest, is designed to ensure that the distortions produced by the narrator’s reading also extend to our own. As we shall see, the story’s implied analogy between reader and narrator was neither accidental, nor inevitable: if there were certain objects that readily elicited what Sully called the “exercise of the imagination” (sequences of dots, lines), to these could be added the page of reading – nothing other than a field of lines and dots after all. Indeed, the imaginative mechanism responsible for the “illusions” that emerged from patterns of wallpaper was also understood to be the mechanism by which letters on a page were assembled into meaningful words. That is to say, it was how reading worked.

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80 Ibid., 144.
81 Sully, Illusions, 95.
II. The Kaleidoscopic Imagination

That Galton, Sully, Jastrow and James should all associate the ability to shift between groups of dots with fire-faces, with the task of “interpreting” clouds, with wallpaper, with insanity, with the illusion of séances, with ghosts, seems unlikely, but as M. H. Abrams so brilliantly demonstrated, more than fifty years ago, a single analogy can become dominant, even structuring. In this case, the analogy was the kaleidoscope.

It was hard to say exactly why it was possible to effect a change in the wallpaper, or to find a face in the fire, but all four psychologists understood it to be a function of what Sully described as “the capricious exercise of the imagination.”\(^{82}\) Though one could shuttle between black and white bands of a pattern – bringing one aspect to the foreground, pushing the other to the back – it was found to be quite difficult to hold any single perception in the mind for a long period of time. A shift would occur suddenly, without any warning: “after looking at the drawing for a time under each aspect, the suggestion now of the one and now of the other forces itself on the mind in a curious and unaccountable way,” Sully wrote.\(^{83}\)

This observation suggested that these perceptions were in some way governed by or linked to physical shifts of the mental apparatus. When awaiting a face in the fire, Sully hypothesized, “the spontaneous activity of the percipient mind is the great determining force.”\(^{84}\) As Galton explained, though the sudden materialization of “well defined faces” in the “red hot coals of the fire” seemed perhaps mysterious, one could provide a mechanical analogue:

This curious property of the imagination to be set a-going by a trifle and to run on by itself in fanciful directions to extravagant lengths, and to end by forming pictures that are

\(^{82}\) Ibid.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 98.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 99-100.
complete even to minute details must be accepted as fact, for which it is not difficult dimly to see a rational explanation. Even a kaleidoscope which consists of only two small strips of mirrors, is adequate to compose an indefinite number of tasteful and complicated patterns out of glimpses of bits of coloured glass, tossed into haphazard arrangements. Much more may we suppose that the brain, whose structure is enormously complicated and acted on by organic memories as well as by present stimuli, should be capable of doing a vast deal more and something of the same kind as the very simple but suggestive instrument.  

For Galton, the kaleidoscope was not a casual analogy, but was based upon the introspective descriptions he had collected during the course of the breakfast-table inquiry. Indeed, in the hundreds of reports that he had gathered, his respondents commonly pointed to the instability of the mental field. Regardless of the quality of imagery an individual experienced – vivid or vague, audile or tactile – the mind always seemed to have the quality of a flickering fire, moving cloud, or shifting kaleidoscope. The very difficulty of drawing a number form or of fully articulating a

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85 Galton, “Free-Will,” 411-412. In Galton’s discussion of the kaleidoscope it is ambiguous as to who is doing the viewing. Is the kaleidoscope metaphor intended to describe the field of the mind, or the function of imagination? Is there any viewer at all? The confusion is perhaps itself telling.

86 Notably, the kaleidoscope appears as a metaphor for imagination in Jane Eyre; Charlotte Brontë in fact met with David Brewster, the inventor of the device.

In the psychological accounts I am examining here, the metaphor is structurally faithful to the machine itself: the bits of colored glass become analogues to the stray mental- and after-images that clutter the mental space. In Brontë’s articulation, by contrast, the metaphor is applied more allusively. That said, Jane Eyre (like Moby Dick) seems to consistently thematize many of the issues I am discussing in this dissertation, and would be an important part of an extended version of this project.

The passage in Jane Eyre begins with a metaphor about kaleidoscopes and goes on to discuss the linked problems of mental imagery and representation, doodling and drawing:

Provided with a case of pencils, and some sheets of paper, I used to take a seat apart from them, near the window, and busy myself in sketching fancy vignettes, representing any scene that happened momentarily to shape itself in the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of imagination: a glimpse of sea between two rocks; the rising moon, and a ship crossing its disk; a group of reeds and water-flags, and a naiad’s head, crowned with lotus-flowers, rising out of them; an elf sitting in a hedge-sparrow's nest, under a wreath of hawthorn-bloom.

One morning I fell to sketching a face: what sort of a face it was to be, I did not care or know. I took a soft black pencil, gave it a broad point, and worked away. Soon I had traced on the paper a broad and prominent forehead and a square lower outline of visage: that contour gave me pleasure; my fingers proceeded actively to fill it with features. … There, I had a friend’s face under my gaze; and what did it signify that those young ladies turned their backs on me? I looked at it; I smiled at the speaking likeness: I was absorbed and content.

‘Is that a portrait of some one you know?’ asked Eliza, who had approached me unnoticed. I responded that it was merely a fancy head, and hurried it beneath the other sheets. Of course, I lied: it was, in fact, a very faithful representation of Mr. Rochester. (Jane Eyre, 262)
mental state was attributable not merely to the unique nature of each individual’s imaginative experience, but to the simple fact that the field of the mind seemed to difficult to hold still. As Galton observed in *Inquiries*, when he looked into his own mental space, he found there “a kaleidoscopic change of patterns and forms.” Though he attempted to document this change, the forms were “too fugitive and elaborate for me to draw with any approach to truth. I am astonished at their variety, and cannot guess in the remotest degree the cause of them.”

James and Sully each made the same analogy. “The composite states of consciousness never remain perfectly uniform for the shortest conceivable duration” Sully wrote. “They change continually, just as the contents of the kaleidoscope vary with every shake of the instrument.” Indeed, as James explained in an 1884 essay, “the whole drift of recent brain inquiry” suggested that the brain was in constant motion:

... as the distribution of brain-tension shifts from one relative state of equilibrium to another, like the aurora borealis or the gyrations of a kaleidoscope, now rapid and now slow, is it likely that the brain’s faithful psychic concomitant is heavier-footed than itself, that its rate of change is coarser-grained, that it cannot match each one of the organ’s irradiations by a shifting inward iridescence of its own? But if it can do this, its inward iridescences must be infinite, for the brain-redistributions are infinite in variety. If so coarse a thing as a telephone plate can be made to thrill for years and never reduplicate its inward condition, how much more must this be the case with the infinitely delicate brain?

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88 Ibid., 114-5.

89 Sully, *Illusions*, 197.

90 Ibid.


92 Ibid., 997-8. In all of these accounts, the emphasis is on a particular kind of intermittent motion – “now rapid and now slow” – that marked the movement of the kaleidoscope.
The century’s debates over philosophy of mind had been largely waged over the precision of a given metaphor – be it theater or camera obscura, wax tablet or photographic plate.93 The choice of analogue implied a thoroughgoing model, and in pursuing a metaphor wholly, the analogy took on structural significance. As a physical object, the kaleidoscope consisted of a pair of mirrors that could be used to reflect shifting bits of colored glass or, alternately, to produce refracted patterns from outward sights. In his 1858 manual for the device, Sir David Brewster, the kaleidoscope’s inventor, described its possibilities:

The furniture of a room, books and papers lying on a table, pictures on the wall, a blazing fire, the moving branches and foliage of trees and shrubs, bunches of flowers, horses and cattle in a park, carriages in motion, the currents of a river, waterfalls, moving insects, the sun shining through clouds or trees, and, in short, every object in nature may be introduced by the aid of the lens into the figures created by the instrument.94

If, as a device, the kaleidoscope could be said to subsume “every object in nature” into a pleasing visual order, a “kaleidoscopic” imagination was likewise able to discover form in almost any “indefinite” perceptual field: faces in fires, figures in rocks, women in wallpaper.

This function could be a source of aesthetic pleasure; for someone on the watch for them, these hidden forms could become a source of artistic inspiration.95 Though Galton himself had

93 “We cannot discuss the activities of the mind without metaphor,” M. H. Abrams has observed (Mirror, 53). Indeed, as Abrams suggests, “the transformation of the key images by which critics pictured the process and product of art” might also form a “convenient index” for the aesthetic theory of any given period (Ibid.). M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

94 David Brewster, The Kaleidoscope: Its History, Theory and Construction, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1858), 94. Though the kaleidoscope was patented by Brewster in 1817, the kaleidoscope only became popular in America in the early 1870s, when Charles Bush improved upon the device.

95 The Baudelairean image of the “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness” is an important touchstone in the critical account of modernity. As Tom Gunning has argued, “Unlike other visual devices of the nineteenth century which claimed to supplement visual representation through illusions of realistic movement or three dimensionality (such as the phenaikistoscope or stereoscope), the kaleidoscope provided a purely visual spectacle, the mechanical complement to the gawker or badaud” (“Kaliedoscope,” 32).
only observed this “curious property” of the imagination recently, he noted that it had long been acknowledged by painters. “Leonardo da Vinci and Turner,” he wrote, “both recognized the need of the imagination for something to work upon, for they, and doubtless very many other painters have done the same, systematically watched chance-groupings of objects to gain pictorial suggestions.”

And yet, while there was pleasure in discovering such “suggestions,” the analogy pointed to a number of interpretive problems presented by a model of imagination that was shifting, evanescent, and contingent, subject to the vagaries of both environment and physiology. As a physical device, the kaleidoscope could be said to mechanize artistic production: the kaleidoscope, Brewster boasted, could “create, in a single hour, what a thousand artists could not invent in the course of a year; and while it works with such unexampled rapidity, it works also with a corresponding beauty and precision.” As a model of imagination, however, it seemed to introduce confusion about the difference between truly artistic perceptions and those produced by the merely mechanistic “caprice” of the mind.

Indeed, though a kaleidoscope produced pleasing visual abstraction, a refracted image of a given object could neither be said to represent that object, nor to reveal new truth about it. Unlike a mirror or a lamp, the kaleidoscope, when taken as a model of imagination, implied neither reflection nor illumination. As Galton had observed, the device (like the imagination) could produce an “indefinite number of tasteful and complicated patterns” out of “haphazard

The “kaleidoscopic” mental apparatus that I am describing here, however, should not be understood in the modernist context. My argument is intended in part to suggest a moment between “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) and Henri Bergson’s later critical re-framing of Baudelaire. Tom Gunning, “From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and Traffic in Souls (1913),” Wide Angle 19, no. 4 (1997): 25-61.


97 Brewster, The Kaleidoscope, 100.
arrangements” of glass – but each of these was utterly individual, unrepeateable, and fundamentally random.98

Indeed, as Galton noted, the imagination could work upon almost anything – including stray mental images that were not in any way related to the conscious content of the mind. As an example, Galton presented one instance of a “visual hallucination being traced to its origin.”99 One of Galton’s respondents had described a spontaneously recurring vision that appeared whenever she closed her eyes: “an assemblage of rapidly moving dots with occasional specks of light.”100 The dots, which formed a “beautiful pattern,” “full of elaborate details,” seemed mysterious, alive with strange significance. One morning, however, she discovered the origin of this “hallucination.” The dots, she told Galton, “‘separated into little lines at regular intervals, then followed cross-lines forming diamonds, and in an instant there was the pattern of a carpet, with clusters of roses and leaves at the points, and a smaller rose at the side.’”101 What had seemed to be an unbidden vision, resonant with deep meaning, was revealed to be a simple matter of carpeting.102

98 Indeed, as Brewster explained, “the property of the Kaleidoscope” that had “excited more wonder” than any other was its power of combination (Kaleidoscope, 131). Twenty-four pieces of glass, he calculated, could be combined 1, 391, 724, 288, 887, 252, 999, 425, 128, 493, 402, 200 times – a task that would “require hundreds of thousands of millions of years, even upon the supposition that twenty of them would be performed every minute” (Ibid.). Even this number did not fully represent the possible variety, as it did not account for all of the variables that might produce a new arrangement. “This system of endless changes is one of the most extraordinary properties of the Kaleidoscope,” Brewster wrote (Ibid., 132). The near infinity of patterns that the device offered produced an experience of individual viewing that could be neither repeated nor shared. “With a number of loose objects it is impossible to reproduce any figure which we have admired. When it is once lost centuries may elapse before the same combination returns” (Ibid.).


100 Ibid.

101 Ibid. Insofar as the field of the mind could now be understood as a field like that of a kaleidoscope – fleeting and ephemeral – a special group of “seers” could emerge: privileged individuals who, though neither artists nor poets, nevertheless experienced isolated, indescribable, private “visions.” Indeed, in Inquiries, Galton described a class he called “visionaries” – those who, like Goethe, reported experiencing recurring, independently automated images.

102 Kaleidoscopes were in fact used to produce patterns for rugs. “There is none of the useful arts to which the creations of the Kaleidoscope are more directly applicable than the manufacture of carpets,” writes Brewster (Kaleidoscope, 144).
“The Yellow Wallpaper,” I have suggested, turns precisely upon this premise. In the story, the pattern of the wallpaper becomes a literal stimulus to the narrator’s imagination, which runs to “extravagant lengths” in producing “pictures that are complete even to minute details.” The faces the narrator finds in the shifting pattern of the wallpaper – so much like the fire-faces Galton described – might be the result of the narrator’s stymied creative energy – the narrator watching for “chance-groupings,” in the artistic mode of painters – or, to the contrary, could be understood as a series of imaginative associations produced through what Galton described as “mere fidget.” Gilman’s story offers no resolution to this question.

The distinction between the one, active imaginative process, and the second, entirely automatic process was no longer clear. Turner, Galton noted, was “known to give colors to give children to daub in play on paper, while he keenly watched for suggestive but accidental combinations.” Galton likened the process to his own experience of doodling – or, as he put it, “the automatic construction of fantastic figures.” When at a meeting or otherwise engaged, Galton would allow his “hand to scribble at its own will”:

> I can trace no likeness between what I draw and the images that present themselves to me in my dreams, and I find that a very trifling accident, such as a chance dot on the paper, may have great influence on the general character of any one of these automatic sketches.

As a reader, one wants to make a distinction between Turner’s process and that of doodling; between Gilman’s narrator as artist and Gilman’s narrator as afflicted by the pattern of a carpet.

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104 Galton, *Inquiries*, 124. Turner, it should be noted, was highly engaged with the perceptual psychology of his time. See Jonathan Crary, “The Blinding Light,” in *J. M. W. Turner: The Sun is God*, exhibition catalogue (Liverpool: Tate, 2000), 19-26.
106 Ibid., 124-5.
But, as Galton implies, the study of the mind’s eye had disrupted the distinction between an artistic perception and one produced, as it were, “automatically.”

One might describe this as the difference between intention and contingency; between mind and body; between psychology and physiology. But it is also the difference between an art object and a natural object; between Turner’s painting and a “smooch” on a wall; between the narrator’s writing and Galton’s automatic doodle. “The Yellow Wallpaper,” if anything, seems to test the distinction between these two modes: is the narrator the artist actively watching for inspiration, or the woman responding to a reflexive “fidget”? The story’s meaning seems to hinge upon this descriptive difference, but the story itself seems to persuasively undermine the possibility of making such an assessment.

As Michael Leja has written, “the self, in the decades around 1900, was known to generate some of the illusions and deceptions that permeated modern experience. Mental and sensory apparatuses were not only inadequate to discerning truth in the modern world but also susceptible to their own baffling eruptions and dysfunctions. … From one’s deepest being visions could arise that might represent transcendent truths and cosmic revelations or psychic dysfunctions and pure deceptions.”107 And yet, though the instability of perceptual experience has been a much-discussed thematic in the fiction of the period – plots obsessed with false-appearances, the unreliability of the senses, the possibility of self-deception – I will argue that this same understanding also extended to the actual mechanism of reading itself. Indeed, while many have discussed what Leja describes as the “illusions and deceptions that permeated modern experience,” it is hardly noted that reading as such counted as an example of just such a “deception” – perhaps even the most common amongst them. As we shall see, the same

psychological discourse that might lead one to write about a woman who interprets wallpaper – that might provide fodder for a narrative, in other words – also provided a theory of interpretation – a theory of how that narrative would ever leave the printed page at all.

III. “The Proof-reader’s Illusion”

Galton’s study of the imagination had led him to understand it to be linked to the physical shifts of the brain, subject to the pressures of both the environment and heredity. As we have seen, however, this understanding introduced a problem. The imagination was a source of new ideas – ideas that Galton deemed crucial to decision-making – but the imagination also functioned in “obscure depths out of the usual ken of consciousness,” upon things that were most often “beyond its view.” Indeed, if a carpet pattern could generate a seemingly “spontaneous” insight, similarly obscure influences could become the unacknowledged source of the ideas that determined any given action. “If these explanations are correct,” Galton wrote, “we must understand the word ‘spontaneity’ in the same sense that a scientific man understands the word ‘chance.’” The impulsive actions that seemed to best represent moments of free agency were now reduced to contingent responses to hidden stimuli.

The sheer multiplicity of these unknown – and unrecognized – stimuli suggested to Galton that human action was for the most part a matter of mere response. “Man,” by this account, could only be described as “little more than a conscious machine….” Though it

109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
accorded with his findings in *Inquiries*, Galton seemed disappointed by this insight—it was, after all, his own free will that he had sought to observe. But the prospect that there remained a “residuum” of life that was “not automatic,” was, he admitted, deeply diminished by his investigation of the mind’s eye. Galton’s studies had led him to a model of imagination that was both “haphazard” and “capricious”; but the acknowledgement of the “wildness” of the imagination seemed to lead ineluctably to a conclusion about the automatism of the human subject, no longer in control of his or her own mental space. The romantic understanding of the independence of the imagination was now rewritten in the negative, the very “freedom” of the imagination positing a kind of strange strangling enclosure: Diversity in the aggregate, solipsism in the individual.

And yet, though this observation was perhaps destabilizing, it nevertheless implied a converse truth. Indeed, the mind’s *ineluctable* tendency to build castles in clouds and find faces in fires also suggested a parallel insight about the mechanism that underlay interpretation itself. In his account of “The Mind’s Eye,” Jastrow included many diagrams that demonstrated the wallpaper effect, but the nearest example was to be found in the perceptual task of reading itself:

> The importance of the mind’s eye in ordinary vision is also well illustrated in cases in which we see or seem to see what is not really present, but what for one cause or another it is natural to suppose is present. A very familiar instance of this process is the constant overlooking of misprints—false letters, transposed letters, and missing letters—unless they happen to be particularly striking. We see only the general physiognomy of the word, and the detailed features are supplied from within; in this case it is the expected that happens. … Reading is thus done largely by the mental eye; and entire words, obviously suggested by the context are sometimes read in, when they have been accidentally omitted. This is more apt to occur with the irregular characters in a

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111 Ibid.
manuscript than in the more distinct forms of the printed alphabet, and is particularly frequent in reading over what one has himself written. In reading proof, however, we are eager to detect misprints, and this change in attitude helps to make them visible.112

Reading consisted of ignoring some details (such as typographic errors), while bringing other, more relevant details to the fore. As Jastrow noted, we only perceive “the general physiognomy of the word” – the “detailed features” are supplied “from within.”113

As in the case of a fire-face, the mind “filled in” the missing information, thus presenting the viewer with a completed “image” that was not necessarily true to the details of the actual physical field itself. Jastrow suggested an experiment to prove the point:

Let the reader at this point hold the page at some distance off – say, eight or twelve feet – and draw an exact reproduction of the letters shown in Fig. 2. [Figure 9 below.] He should not look at Fig. 2 at close range nor read further in the text until this has been done; and perhaps he may find that he has introduced strokes which were not present in the original.114

The figure included the large block letters “EDITOR” with portions of the letters removed. As Jastrow explained, “most persons will supply light lines to complete the contours of the letters, which in the original are suggested but not really present.”115

The “physiognomy” of a word, emerging from the visual field of the page was understood to be precisely the same “face” discovered in a field of flames. In his essay on free will, Galton had described the process of finding a face in the coals: “a part of the mind,

112 Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 280.
113 Ibid., 279.
114 Ibid., 280.
115 Ibid.
unconsciously, and frequently against subsequent judgment and will, is found to have been
struck by some chance-lines or sequence of points that serve to suggest a picture. It has ignored
everything that does not conform to the unconsciously suggested image and has fancifully
supplied whatever is deficient.” In this case, the “chance-lines” suggested the “picture” of a
word; the mind “fancifully supplied whatever is deficient.”

Jastrow had obscured parts of the typography, but the same observation obtained for
whole words; thus, for example, it was possible to read a sentence with only half of its letters
included: Cna ouy rd this? Even with missing or jumbled letters, context and expectation
supplied the meaning. Galton likewise described reading as a kind of “illusion.” As he explained,

It happens that although most persons train themselves from childhood upwards to
distinguish imagination from fact, there is at least one instance in which we do the exact
reverse, namely, in respect to the auditory presentation of the words that are presented to

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117 What does this sentence say? See Figure 10.
the eye. It would be otherwise impossible to realise the sonorous flow of the passages, whether in prose or poetry, that are read only with the eyes.\textsuperscript{118}

Indeed, what James called “The Proof-reader’s Illusion” was an effect of the same class as that produced at a fraudulent séance. One night, waiting for a ride to Cambridge, James had mistaken the words “North Avenue” for “Mount Auburn,” printed on the signboard of a car. “The illusion was so vivid,” he recalled, “that I could hardly believe my eyes had deceived me.”\textsuperscript{119} He continued,

> All reading is more or less performed in this way. Practiced novel- or newspaper-readers could not possibly get on so fast if they had to see accurately every single letter of every word in order to perceive the words. More than half of the words come out of their mind, and hardly half from the printed page. Were this not so, did we perceive each letter by itself, typographic errors in well-known words would never be overlooked.\textsuperscript{120}

For each of these psychologists, the simple act of reading was amongst the primary (and most reliable) illustrations of the way in which the mind produced “illusions.” But illustration was required. As Sully pointed out, “the nineteenth century intelligence plumes itself on having got at the bottom of mediæval visions and church miracles, and it is wont to commiserate the feeble minds that are still subject to these self-deceptions.”\textsuperscript{121} “According to this view,” Sully continued, “illusion is something essentially abnormal and allied to insanity.”\textsuperscript{122} Sully’s whole volume, he said, was an effort to correct this position: “illusion,” he said, “constitutes a kind of


\textsuperscript{119} James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 96.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following are miscellaneous nouns.</td>
<td>The following are names of articles of dress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. P- -er</td>
<td>1. Gl-v-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. N-m-</td>
<td>2. -at</td>
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<td>3. H-b-t</td>
<td>3. T-e</td>
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<td>4. S-c- -l</td>
<td>4. P-n</td>
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<td>5. V-l-e</td>
<td>5. C- -t</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. P-n</td>
<td>6. -o-l- r</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. B- -k</td>
<td>7. B- - t-u</td>
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<td>8. St-e-t</td>
<td>8. -e-ch- -f</td>
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<td>9. -o-se</td>
<td>9. Sh-e</td>
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<td>10. Gl-  -</td>
<td>10. C- - f</td>
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<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following are names of household furnishings.</td>
<td>The following are names of familiar fruits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. C-a-r</td>
<td>1. A- -le</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. L-wa-</td>
<td>2. C- -y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. B-d</td>
<td>3. O-a-g-</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. R--l- r</td>
<td>4. Pl- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. T-b- -</td>
<td>5. L- -a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C- -t-in</td>
<td>6. B- -a-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. D- -sw-r</td>
<td>7. -pr- -ot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. P-ct- re</td>
<td>8. P-a-h</td>
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<td>9. D- -k</td>
<td>9. Gr-p-</td>
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<td>10. St- -</td>
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<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following are names of well-known American authors.</td>
<td>The following are miscellaneous nouns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. B- -rs-u</td>
<td>1. Pl-o-</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. L-wc- -</td>
<td>2. T-e-</td>
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<td>3. H- -m-s</td>
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<td>4. R-l- y</td>
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<td>5. B- -a-t</td>
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<td>6. W-l- -t</td>
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<td>7. C- -p-r</td>
<td>7. R-v- r</td>
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<td>8. P- -</td>
<td>8. W-q- -</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I- -w-n-</td>
<td>9. Sq- -r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. V- -D-ik-</td>
<td>10. -n-m-l</td>
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*Figure 10. From Daniel Starch, *Experiments in Educational Psychology* (1912).*
border-land between perfectly sane and vigorous mental life and dementia.”123 For these psychologists, the diagrams – hollow boxes, chess boards, six-pointed stars, typographic games (many of which I have included above) – were provided as a field upon which the reader could make an experiment; the acts of introspection required to “resolve” these images demonstrated to the “perfectly sane” reader that illusion was an ordinary feature of perception. As Jastrow explained, the “illustrations” were included to “show conclusively that seeing is not wholly an objective matter….”124 If the prompted experiments were duly executed, the reader would be provided with a demonstration, in miniature, of the same mechanism that governed the apparently “irregular phenomena of the mental world” – a visceral proof of the mental instability common to us all.125

Gilman’s story, I will argue, functions in precisely the same register. To put it straightforwardly, Gilman supplies a diagram upon which her reader can make an experiment. Like each of the psychologists I have been discussing, Gilman foregrounds the perceptual act of reading, and in doing so, I will suggest, brings the reader to an understanding of what Sully described as the “continuity of normal and abnormal life.”126

Readers who encountered “The Yellow Wallpaper” in its 1899 edition would not have to look very far for a field upon which to experiment with the wallpaper effect: the cover presented the reader with a direct illustration of the wallpaper that the narrator described. (Figure 11.)

123 Ibid., 4.
124 Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 294.
125 Ibid., viii.
126 Sully, Illusions, ix.
As one reviewer put it, “the book is bound in what one may suppose is a sample of the abhorred paper, and its grotesque design will easily arouse sympathy for the poor lady.” The cover was as unpleasant to look at as the wallpaper itself; as another reader remarked, it was “not beautiful in design, but purposely intended to represent the horrible wall covering that caused the insanity of the poor nervous invalid who was compelled to look at it day after day.”

The choice to cover the book with a “sample of the abhorred paper” strengthened the structural parallel between the reader and the narrator. Though the narrator is prohibited from

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taking up a book, Gilman continually likens the narrator’s gaze upon the wallpaper to a form of reading. Lying upon a “great immovable bed,” the narrator follows the lines of the “paper” with her eyes alone:

It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we’ll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.  

The passage of course evokes our own task of reading in the moment – one in which we ourselves (perhaps lying in bed with a book) attempt to “follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion.” The cover illustration heightened this link. “… [T]he wall paper in prototype peers at you from the covers of the little book with staring bulbous eyes all over the livid orange and a sulphurous smooch at its base,” wrote one reviewer, in a direct echo of the language of the narrator.  

And yet, while the illustration underscored the analogy between the reader’s encounter with the text and the narrator’s experience of looking at wallpaper, Gilman’s story, I would argue, does not require such an illustration in order for the reader to experience an effect similar to that of the story’s “poor nervous invalid.” Indeed, though nearly every critical account of the story in the past twenty years has remarked upon the parallelism between the reader’s position

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and that of the narrator, it has hardly been noted that Gilman’s text literally – that is to say, visually – in fact resembles the wallpaper that the narrator describes.

In its first publication, the story appeared in two parallel columns:

As one can see above, Gilman’s use of short, one-sentence paragraphs creates a series of indentations into the text.131 These indentations are, for the most part, abutted by the letter ‘I.’ (In the portion of page pictured, 16 of 24 paragraphs begin with the letter ‘I’ – which is to say, two-of-every-three paragraphs).132 The vertical dash of the letter, heading each paragraph, creates a visual pattern – a broken line – running down the two margins.

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132 The pronoun repeats 246 times in the course of the nine pages.
This vertical pattern is intersected by dots – horizontal rows of asterisks, set between sections. The sentences themselves are further “broken” into a kind of Morse code, peppered with dots and dashes. The word “wall-paper” was hyphenated in the original printing, and Gilman’s liberal use of em-dashes (—) and exclamation points (!) represents a second series of horizontal and vertical lines. Indeed, one might even extend this observation to Gilman’s choice of vocabulary: the letters l and o – as in “yellow” “wallowing” “toadstools” – appear with frequency, the series of dots and dashes of the words evoking the “bulbous eyes” and “lolling heads” sprouting over the paper itself.133

In this respect, the page itself becomes a kind of visual pun, the words at times verging upon the iconic. “This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!” says the narrator.134 She continues,

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breaths didn’t match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have.135

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135 Ibid., 168.
When the reader engages in the "illusion" that allows one to "realise the sonorous flow of the passages" the "eyes" here become homologous with the I's that run down the page. (Figure 13.) The "unblinking" I's "are everywhere," "all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other" — or, as Gilman puts it elsewhere, "waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity."136

Figure 13. Two pages of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," The New England Magazine (January 1892).

Black marks indicate the occurrence of I and !

136 Ibid., 170.
The capital letter ‘I’ repeats, but whole words do as well. Indeed, though the story barely occupied nine pages in its original printing, the word “wall” appears 23 times; “pattern” 25 times; “John” 33 times. Notably, word repetitions often occur in close proximity and at the beginning of paragraphs, and are thus positioned directly atop one another. In the first section of the story alone we find “John” / “John” / “John”; “personally” / “personally”; “there” / “there” / “there”; “he” / “he” stacked in vertical columns. (Figure 14.)

 Else, why should it be let so cheaply?
 And why have stood so long untenanted?
 John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.
 John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.
 John is a physician, and perhaps — (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind — ) perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.
 You see he does not believe I am sick!
 And what can one do?

 So I take phosphates or phosphites — whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work,” until I am well again.
 personGally, I disagree with their ideas.
 personGally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

 There is a delicious garden! I never saw such a garden — large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.
 There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.
 There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

 He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.
 He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

 Figure 14. Excerpts from the opening of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,”
 New England Magazine (January 1892).

 This visual patterning is only in addition to the repetitions that occur in the story’s metaphorical register; similar figures consistently recur throughout (“a waddling fungus,” “bulbous eyes”). And even here, Gilman’s use of metaphor is marked by words that are not only synonymous in
meaning but that are near letter-for-letter repetitions of one another: the lines of the wallpaper first “wallowing,” then “waddling” in short order.\(^{137}\)

In this respect, I would argue, Gilman’s page itself may be understood as a kind of *literal illustration: a perceptual field that visually resembles a wallpaper — repeating dots and dashes printed on yellowing paper, set in columns.* The consistent visual repetitions produce a distancing effect – a self-consciousness of the interpretive process – something akin to the effects of staring at a word too long. As William James observed in *Principles of Psychology,* “if we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. … It stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no speculation in it.”\(^{138}\) The repetition, James explained, produces an awareness of the interpretive act. “Perception,” he wrote, is “to a certain extent baffled by this maneuver.”\(^{139}\) The effect was similar to that of viewing a face upside down: “Just so, if we lie on the floor and look up at the mouth of a person talking behind us.”\(^{140}\) The strange position disrupted the interpretive process, and so yielded an awareness of the mind’s participation in the act of perception.\(^{141}\)

*Jastrow, Sully, James and Galton each included diagrams of patterns in their texts. The point, in part, was to give the reader an experience of what Jastrow described as the “double strain” in perception – and so too, an experience of the link between “apparently irregular phenomena of the mental world” and those of everyday life.\(^{142}\) Gilman’s page, I would argue, serves the same purpose as that of Jastrow’s stripes or Sully’s boxes. Indeed, if the response from

\(^{137}\) Ibid.

\(^{138}\) James, *Principles,* vol. 2, 80-81.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{140}\) Ibid.

\(^{141}\) I will address the effects of this “interruption” in my third chapter – as well as its relation to the “wallpaper effect.”

\(^{142}\) Jastrow, *Fact and Fable,* 295.
Gilman’s contemporary readers is any indication, Gilman’s pages were as successful at conveying experience as a psychologist’s diagrams. “With wonderful word-selection drawing curves and blobs and goggling eyes, with none of the real facts of her story told, but all left to inference, with no plot at all, but the simple ‘un-narration’ of the horrors of the beginnings of puerperal insanity, Charlotte Perkins Stetson has done work in ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper…,’” wrote one reader. 143 The book was one “to keep away from the young wife,” the writer concluded, as “it makes the reader feel that his own mind is slipping to read behind the mad woman's chatter….” 144 As another reviewer observed: “Most attempts to work up insanity as ‘material’ are ineffective; but here the progress from nervous sensitiveness to illusion, and on to delusion, is put before the reader so insidiously that he feels something of that same chill alarm for his own mental soundness that accompanies actual contact with lunatics.” 145

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Jastrow, like Sully, had opened his chapter on “The Mind’s Eye” with a reference to Hamlet’s ghost. But for these psychologists, the “mind’s eye” is no longer the exalted agent by which one might produce the “thought-pictures” of poetry and fiction. Though clearly a source of aesthetic pleasure, in these accounts, the role of the imagination in literature seems to be radically reduced, a function of mechanically translating a visual field of dots and lines into a set of meaningful


144 Ibid.

words. The space of the imagination is not the space at the back of the reader’s skull – the private theater of the mind – but rather, the perceptual space between the reader and the page. If the mind’s eye had ever been a mysterious, misty faculty, imbued with poetic resonance, it was now relegated to the task of “overlooking misprints.”

And yet, though one might understand this description of the mind’s eye to be somewhat reductive, this description also offered a new field for the work of literature – that of the mind itself. As Sully observed, “there seems to be no sudden break between our most sober every-day recognitions of familiar objects and the wildest hallucinations of the demented.” He had begun his discourse with the fire-face – the most common of perceptual illusions, but as his volume demonstrated, “the slight, scarcely noticeable illusions of normal life lead up to the most startling hallucinations of abnormal life.” “Does this way of putting the subject seem alarming?” Sully asked. “Is it an appalling thought that our normal mental life is thus intimately related to insanity, and graduates away into it by such fine transitions?” His answer was No. “We should accept the occasional failure of the intellectual mechanism as an inseparable accompaniment of its general efficiency.”

The “failure” in these cases was, in fact, a trick to be practiced. “Mr. Galton’s interesting inquiries into the power of ‘visualizing,’” Sully wrote, “would appear to prove that many people can at will sport on the confines of the phantom world of hallucination.” Indeed, authors had learned to do it long ago:

Malebranche, for example, is said to have heard the voice of God calling him. Descartes

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146 Ibid., 121.  
147 Ibid.  
148 Ibid., 123.  
149 Ibid., 124.  
150 Ibid., 117.
says that, after a long confinement, he was followed by an invisible person, calling him to pursue his search for truth. Dr. Johnson narrates that he once heard his absent mother calling him. Byron tells us that he was sometimes visited by specters. Goethe records that he once saw an exact counterpart of himself coming towards him. Sir Walter Scott is said to have seen a phantom of the dead Byron.\footnote{Ibid., 116-7.}

As Sully pointed out, “this power can be greatly improved by attention and cultivation.”\footnote{Ibid., 117.} If we each had “mental habits,” a “bent of interpretive imagination,” those “bents” could be re-trained. Such imaginative “sport” was good for us. Indeed, by invoking illusion we would inoculate ourselves against the slipping “continuity of sane and insane life.”\footnote{Ibid., 123.} “It should never be forgotten that in normal states of mind there is always the possibility of rectifying an illusion.”\footnote{Ibid., 125.}

If we would “only choose to exert ourselves,” he wrote, “we can always keep our illusions in the nascent or imperfectly developed stage.”\footnote{Ibid.} “Repetition,” he said, “makes the process easier.”\footnote{Ibid.}

When “The Yellow Wallpaper” was submitted for publication at \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} in 1890, the editor rejected the piece with a single line: “Mr. Howells has handed me this story. I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!”\footnote{Horace E. Scudder to Charlotte Perkins Stetson [Gilman], October 18, 1890, in \textit{Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition}, ed. Catherine J. Golden (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.} After reading the story, a Boston physician likewise suggested that the tale might be dangerous:

> It certainly seems open to serious question if such literature should be permitted in print. The story can hardly, it would seem, give pleasure to any reader, and to many whose lives have been touched through the nearest ties by this dread disease, it must bring the keenest pain. To others, whose lives have become a struggle against an heredity of mental...
derangement, such literature contains deadly peril.\textsuperscript{158}

In “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper” Gilman responded to this complaint, summarizing the Boston physician’s review: “Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.”\textsuperscript{159} To the contrary, she asserted, “it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being crazy, and it worked.”\textsuperscript{160}

In order to “save people from being crazy” – in order to produce a story that “worked” – Gilman, I have argued, produced a text that demands a kind of self-experimentation from the reader.\textsuperscript{161} But the task of introspection is not always pleasant. In his chapter on “The Mind’s Eye,” Jastrow included 18 diagrams, each of which demanded the reader’s exercise. He urged his readers’ patience:

In order to obtain the effects described in the various illustrations it is necessary in several cases to regard the figures for a considerable time and with close attention. The reader is requested not to give up in case the first attempt to secure the effect is not successful, but to continue the effort for a reasonable period.\textsuperscript{162}

For Galton’s part, the repeated task of introspection was found “to be extremely trying and irksome.”\textsuperscript{163} The demand to observe one’s own act of perception produced a kind of mental strain. Though he had devised his own course of inquiry, he admitted that “it was a most repugnant and laborious work.”\textsuperscript{164}


\textsuperscript{159} Gilman, “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper,” 271.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{162} Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 278.

\textsuperscript{163} Galton, Inquiries, 134.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 136.
If readers have likewise found Gilman’s story “irksome,” it is perhaps for the same reason. Gilman herself acknowledged the story’s “miserable” effect: “It’s a simple tale,” she wrote in a letter, “but highly unpleasant.” And yet, though such experiments were perhaps trying, they were also vital. Sully closed his chapter with a discussion of Coleridge:

On this point the following bit of autobiography from the pen of Coleridge throws an interesting light. ‘A lady (he writes) once asked me if I believed in ghosts and apparitions. I answered with truth and simplicity, No, madam, I have seen far too many myself.’ However irresistible our sense-illusions may be, so long as we are under the sway of particular impressions or mental images, we can, when resolved to do so, undeceive ourselves by carefully attending to the actual state of things about us.

The practice of “deceiving” oneself – the practice of shuttling between two aspects of a hollow box, between triangles and a hexagon, between the dead “glass eye” of a repeated word and its “living” aspect – instructed one in the practice of dismissing the larger “illusions,” the “ghosts and apparitions” that could appear to anyone, in sickness or in health.

The instability of perceptual experience has long been understood as a recurrent theme in late nineteenth-century American literature. But contrary to the idea that a new understanding of perception presented a destabilizing and threatening “rupture,” in the chapters that follow, I will argue that the same insights also provided a countervailing and compensatory model of knowledge, discovered in the perceptual illusion of reading itself. Indeed, for the writers I am examining here, the understanding of reading as a kind of illusion suggested an alternate mode of connection, located in the self’s deceptions, rather than apart from them.

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166 Sully, Illusions, 125-6.
For her part, Gilman was well acquainted with the continuity between sanity and insanity, ordinary perception and madness. In a letter to William Dean Howells she explained the motive for her writing; under Mitchell’s treatment, she said, she “went as near lunacy as one can, and come back. So I wrote this. – and sent him a copy.” And yet, if Gilman aspires to transmit an experience of insanity to one who, like Mitchell, has never been “near lunacy” – to transmit, in other words, an experience that extends past the particular bodily experience of a particular reader – this aspiration is only made possible by an understanding of imagination that is grounded in the bodily machinations of the brain. In this respect, as we shall see, illusion becomes a source of a common embodied meaning – not in contradiction to the accurate perception of reality, but rather, a means of coming into acquaintance with its contours.

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CHAPTER II. TRAINING

Reading Pudd’nhead Wilson

In 1892, Mark Twain received a copy of Francis Galton’s newly published *Finger Prints*.¹ Twain, at work on a novel, wrote to his publisher to say that he had “devoured” the book, and Galton’s new technique became the basis for the plot of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1893-4).² In *Pudd’nhead*, Twain drew directly upon Galton’s vocabulary (“arches, circles, long curves, whorls, etc.”) as well as many of his observations; Wilson’s monologue in the final trial scene does not describe a process of assembling clues or accruing evidence, so much as it is a straightforward lecture on the technology of fingerprinting, parallel to Galton’s own.³ Indeed, though the action of *Pudd’nhead*, set in 1830, pre-dates the invention of fingerprinting, Twain

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Galton: “The dimensions of the limbs and body alter in the course of growth and decay; the colour, quantity, and quality of the hair, the tint and quality of the skin, the number and set of the teeth, the expression of the features, the gestures, the handwriting, even the eye-colour, change after many years. There seems no persistence in the visible parts of the body, except in these minute and hitherto too much disregarded ridges.” (Finger Prints, 98)

Twain: “This signature is not his face – age can change that beyond recognition; it is not his hair, for that can fall out; it is not his height, for duplicates of that exist; it is not his form, for duplicates of that exist also, whereas this signature is each man’s very own – there is no duplicate of it among the swarming populations of the globe! [The audience were interested once more.]” (*Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 169)
was seemingly so taken with the technique that he revised the text in order to incorporate it into
the novel’s resolution. Twain was truly prescient in this respect; when he wrote the story,
fingerprints had not yet been used as evidence in court.4 It is for this reason that Pudd’nhead
Wilson has been described as “the first post-Galtonian novel.”5

As many of Twain’s later readers have noted, Galton’s study of fingerprints was frankly
motivated by an interest in eugenics.6 Galton hoped that the statistical study of these “self-
signatures” would present a kind of objective version of palm reading, a combination of
physiognomy and handwriting analysis.7 “I had great expectations for their use in indicating
Race and Temperament,” Galton wrote. “I thought that any hereditary peculiarities would almost
of necessity vary in different races, and that so fundamental and enduring a feature as the finger
markings must in some way be correlated with temperament.”8 After careful study, however,
Galton admitted that his “great expectations” had “been falsified.”9 As Galton explained, upon
examination of the fingerprints of the “English, pure Welsh, Hebrew, and Negro” amongst
others, “it may emphatically be said that there is no peculiar pattern which characterises persons
of any of the above races.”10

And yet, in spite of the fact that Galton’s “great expectations” were disappointed, the plot
of Pudd’nhead Wilson seems – almost perversely – to fulfill Galton’s eugenic agenda. In the

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5 Ibid.
6 Anne Wigger was amongst the first to note the link. See Anne P. Wigger, “The Source of the Fingerprint Material in Mark Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins,” American Literature 28 (January 1957): 517-20.
7 Galton, Finger Prints, 168.
8 Ibid., 17.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 192-3.
final trial scene, Wilson uses the fingerprints to reveal not only Tom’s guilt, but his race as well: “‘Valet de Chambre, Negro and slave – falsely called Thomas à Becket Driscoll – make upon the window the fingerprints that will hang you!’”\(^1\) The fingerprint, in Twain’s text, comes to be a “sure identifier” – an indication of character and race, both made suddenly manifest in Tom’s “natal autograph.”\(^12\) Thus, as Susan Gillman has written, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Twain “out-Galtons Galton.”\(^13\) Michael Rogin is more critical: “the victory for Pudd’nhead Wilson is a defeat for Francis Galton and Mark Twain,” he writes.\(^14\) “Fingerprints defeat Galton because they cannot establish racial and characterological difference; they defeat Mark Twain because they can.”\(^15\)

Twain’s use of Galton has thus come to mark the deep moral failings of the novel: a sign either of Twain’s own buried ambivalence about race or of his inability to think outside the bounds of his historical moment. Indeed, as Eric Sundquist has observed, even as a parody of racial thinking, the novel comes dangerously close to replicating the terms of its own critique.\(^16\) And yet, though much has been said about the ways in which the *plot* of the novel reflects Twain’s reading of Galton, Twain, I would suggest, also drew upon another aspect of Galton’s text – one that crucially re-orient the moral valence of the novel’s ending.

Notably, Galton’s monograph includes not one, but two accounts of the interpretive problem presented by fingerprints: a problem not only of race and character, but also one of

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 176.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 170.
\(^{13}\) Gillman, “Sure Identifiers,” 460.
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
reading. Indeed, though Galton concluded definitively that “there is no particular pattern that is
special to any one [fingerprint], which when met with enables us to assert, or even to suspect, the
nationality of the person on whom it appeared,” he admitted that “I was misled at first by some
accidental observations.” These “accidents” were produced by the nature of the fingerprint
itself. The “maze formed by the minute lineations” became almost instantly “bewildering” to the
viewer – a problem compounded when studying many prints at length. As Galton explained,
upon first sorting, “I failed completely, and many analogous plans were attempted without
success”:

After tedious re-sortings, some sixty standards were provisionally selected, and the whole
laid by for a few days. On returning to the work with a fresh mind, it was painful to find
how greatly my judgment had changed in the interim, and how faulty a classification that
seemed tolerably good a week before, looked then. Moreover, I suffered the shame and
humiliation of discovering that the identity of certain duplicates had been overlooked,
and that one print had been mistaken for another.

On considering the causes of these doubts and blunders, different influences were
found to produce them, any one of which was sufficient by itself to give rise to serious
uncertainty. A complex pattern is capable of suggesting various readings, as the figuring
on a wall-paper may suggest a variety of forms and faces to those who have such fancies.
The number of illusive renderings of prints taken from the same finger, is greatly
increased by such trifles as the relative breadths of their respective lineations and the
differences in their depths of tint.

Galton here describes the perceptual problem of the “face in the fire.” As we have seen, the
“figuring on wall-paper,” like the black-and-white whorls of the fingerprints, presented a fertile
field for the imagination. Though this posed no inherent problem, in the context of a statistical

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18 Ibid., 6.
19 Ibid., 65-6.
study, the possibility that “various readings” might be produced out of this “complex pattern” presented a serious interpretive obstacle – even “trifles” of printing could influence the result. The idea that the fingerprint could, like clouds, rocks and fire, “suggest a variety of forms and faces to those who have such fancies” meant that Galton would in some way have to control for the possibility of “illusive renderings.”

Galton thus introduced a system whereby the “whorls,” “loops” and “arches” of the fingerprint would be outlined before classification and labeled.20 (Figure 1.) “These outlines,” Galton wrote, “have an extraordinary effect in making finger markings intelligible to an untrained eye.”21 “After a pattern has been treated in this way, there is no further occasion to pore minutely into the finger print, in order to classify it correctly, for the bold firm curves of the outline are even more distinct than the largest capital letters in the title-page of a book.”22 From these “letters,” Galton assembled a kind of alphabet:

One method that I have adopted … is to sketch in a cursive and symbolic form the patterns of the several fingers in the order in which they appear in the print, confining myself to a limited number of symbols, such as might be used for printer’s types. They sufficed fairly for some thousands of the finger marks upon which they were tried, but doubtless they could be improved. A little violence has of course to be used now and then, in fitting some unusual patterns to some one or other of these few symbols. But we are familiar with such processes in ordinary spelling, making the same letter do duty for different sounds, as a in the words as, ale, ask, and all.23 (Figure 2.)

Here Galton likens the act of interpreting fingerprints to the literal act of reading. The language of fingerprinting helped this association: the marks were, after all, a series of black “prints,” in

20 Ibid., 13.
21 Ibid., 69.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 144.
ink, on white paper, that, in their first use, served as literal substitutes for a signature. Indeed, on the title page of Galton’s own book, he presented his own “signature” as a series of his ten fingerprints, writ as large as “capital letters.” (Figure 3.)

When Twain wrote a letter to his publishers, thanking them for Galton’s book, he cribbed Galton’s joke, substituting his own “mysterious and marvelous natal autograph” – his fingerprints – for his actual signature. But for both Galton and for Twain, I will suggest, the idea that fingerprints could be “read” as a text was more than metaphorical. As we have seen, the interpretive mechanism that allowed one to perceive “forms and faces” in wallpaper, in fingerprints, or in any “complex pattern” was also understood to be the literal mechanism by which reading occurred. In these cases, the instability of the visual field provided a reliable prompt for “illusory” perceptions; the mind either suppressed details that were present or added details that were not, thus finding significant form where there was perhaps none. But what was an error in one context was an efficiency in another. As William James observed, “practised novel- or newspaper-readers could not possibly get on so fast if they had to see accurately every single letter of every word in order to perceive the words. More than half of the words come out of their mind, and hardly half from the printed page.” Indeed, he said, “all reading is more or less performed in this way.”

As James pointed out, the very existence of typographic errors, nonsense sentences and other forms of “cant” or cliché demonstrated how much the reader contributed to the matter of reading:

Discourses at prayer-meetings, re-shuffling the same collection of cant phrases, and the

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26 Ibid., 95.
whole genus of penny-a-line-isms and newspaper-reporter’s flourishes give illustrations of this. ‘The birds filled the tree-tops with their morning song, making the air moist, cool, and pleasant,’ is a sentence I remember reading once in a report of some athletic exercises in Jerome Park. It was probably written unconsciously by the hurried reporter, and read uncritically by many readers.\(^\text{27}\)

Just as it was possible to perceive a face in a cloud – a face where there properly was none – a reader might even at times perceive meaning in “nonsense,” elide mistakes, add what was missing.\(^\text{28}\) Twain, I will argue, draws upon this structure of reading in reverse – as a means of engendering errors of reading, errors created by expectation and association, cliché and cant, stereotype and convention. In order to understand *Pudd’nhead*, I will suggest, we will have to attend to the reading that is not present on the “printed page,” the “half” that comes “out of the mind” itself – the “half” generated through expectation and experience.

As Galton observed in *Finger Prints*, “a complex pattern is capable of suggesting various readings”; in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, we shall see, Twain quite literally seeks to exploit this interpretive mechanism, producing “various readings” that directly conflict with one another over the course of the text. Indeed, as many of Twain’s readers have noted, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is riddled with inconsistencies of plot and characterization. In his authoritative account of the novel’s composition history, Herschel Parker presents the most serious articulation of this problem. In spite of the errors and discrepancies that populate the text, Parker observes, most critics address the text with a “trusting” eye – and “what they find is unity.”\(^\text{29}\) Quoting the critic Ralph Rader, Parker writes,

> the mind is a ‘meaning-seeking faculty’; by its nature the mind ‘actively seeks to impose

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 263.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 264.

\(^{29}\) Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 139.
meaning and to eliminate ambiguity in its encounters with the world, and so it must certainly be with language.’ In responding to an utterance, Rader goes on, the mind ‘scans and interprets it so as to discover that meaning which renders the whole coherent and significant, to the exclusion of partial and incomplete meanings.’ It is this order-imposing instinct, finally … which impels readers to celebrate a text containing passages of indubitable interest and power but faked, palmed off as a genuine novel like another good novel, one where early scenes prepare for the middle and the later scenes, where patterns established at the outset are fulfilled in subsequent pages, where all the aspects really do work together in a transcendent unity.\textsuperscript{30}

For Parker, Twain’s novel is a “fake” – an imitation, a false imposter. If “patterns” are discovered in \textit{Pudd’nhead} then, they will be a product of the reader’s “‘meaning-seeking faculty’” rather than Twain’s own intention. As Parker points out, “the human mind is designed to smooth out anomalies, in order not to be overwhelmed by them.”\textsuperscript{31} Thus, though “the published \textit{Pudd’nhead Wilson} is … patently unreadable, anyone who knows literary critics will know that a simple fact like that has not deterred them from trying to read the book and bragging about having done so.”\textsuperscript{32}

Nearly 30 years later, Parker’s admonishment still lingers. As Joe B. Fulton has observed, “so trenchant is Parker’s criticism that even critics who disagree with his opinion find themselves forced to grapple with the text’s problematic aesthetics.”\textsuperscript{33} And yet, I will argue, by understanding Twain’s novel as critically engaged \textit{with} the “psychology and physiology of the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 144-5.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 136. Parker mocks Karen Mann for pulling a “‘formal structure’ out of apparent disparity” or John C. Gerber’s solution, which was to “read \textit{Pudd’nhead} not as a novel but as a ‘fabulation’…. In all of these, and many others, the critics define their role as bringing order out of a chaos which they insist is only apparent, not real. The order \textit{must} be there, awaiting the sufficiently attentive and unbiased reading which the present critic is always the first to supply” (\textit{Flawed}, 142). I take quite seriously Parker’s suspicion of arguments that seem to artificially push for a coherent “sense” to the novel – a resolution of parts that do not properly fit. I do not intend to suggest that the text is “solved” under my own rubric – \textit{nor that the point of the text is merely the fact of its disjunction}.
\textsuperscript{33} Joe B. Fulton, \textit{Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism} (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 120.
sense-making reader” it is possible to understand many of the novel’s discrepancies as crucial to the novel’s larger work.\textsuperscript{34}

Notably, Parker’s evocation of the “order-imposing instinct” echoes an observation made by William James, writing nearly a century earlier. As James noted in \textit{Principles}, the line between “objective sense and nonsense is hard to draw; that between subjective sense and nonsense, impossible.”\textsuperscript{35} The “meaning-seeking faculty” – especially of a reader searching for coherence – would at times produce its own reality. “There are every year works published whose contents show them to be by real lunatics,” James wrote.\textsuperscript{36}

Take the obscurer passages in Hegel: it is a fair question whether the rationality included in them be anything more than the fact that the words all belong to a common vocabulary, and are strung together on a scheme of predication and relation – immediacy, self-relation, and what not – which has habitually recurred. Yet there seems no reason to doubt that the subjective feeling of the rationality of these sentences was strong in the writer as he penned them, or even that some readers by straining may have reproduced it in themselves.\textsuperscript{37}

As Parker’s critique suggests, Twain’s novel produces a similar kind of mental “strain” – one induced by the effort to “resolve” the text’s many incongruities. But though Twain’s text fails to “resolve,” this very irresolution, I will argue, can be understood as constituent of an effort to reshape the reader’s \textit{mind itself} – a work that was urgent in Reconstruction America. As we shall see, if \textit{Pudd’nhead} seems to “reproduce” the structure of racism that it parodies, Twain will show this to be a structure that has quite literally been produced – and “reproduced” – \textit{in ourselves as well}.

\textsuperscript{34} Parker, \textit{Flawed}, 144.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
Figure 1. “Set of Standard Patterns,” from Francis Galton, *Finger Prints* (1892).
Table IX.—Index to 100 Sets of Finger Prints.

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Figure 2. “100 Sets of Finger Prints,” from Francis Galton, *Finger Prints* (1892).
Pudd’nhead Wilson opens with a joke gone wrong – the “unfortunate remark” that earns Wilson his nickname. Wilson, we are told, “had just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when an invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and howl and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable.” “‘I wish I owned half of that dog,’” Wilson comments. “‘Why?’” someone asks – “‘Because I would kill my half.’” Notably, there is no ostensible need for the dog to be “invisible” in this scene – Wilson’s joke would work just as well (or poorly) if a snarling dog had wandered into view. But “invisibility” – what can be heard, but not seen – I will argue, is

38 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 8.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
precisely what is at stake in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The people of Dawson’s Landing don’t understand Wilson’s joke – as the narrator remarks later, “irony was not for those people; their mental vision was not focused for it.” The comment, I would suggest, applies to the reader as well; if we are to understand the novel’s ironies it will likewise be a matter of “focusing” our “mental vision.”

Indeed, in order to understand the work of the novel we will have to address what might be called the “invisible” half of the text – what is explicitly *cued* by the text, but *excluded* from it. In the pages that follow, I will not attempt to untangle the knotted interpretive problem presented by the novel’s many inconsistencies. Rather, I hope to illustrate that these interpretive problems repeatedly emerge through a very *specific* structure of reading – one that *exploits* the “meaning-seeking faculty” that Parker describes. This structure is carefully – even painstakingly – modeled for the reader in the first scene of the narrative, and repeated thereafter throughout the text, in more compressed and accelerated forms. Before continuing, I must ask my reader to read this scene with me. In the chapter that follows I will address this scene in detail; it will be important then to understand its architecture.

As the story opens, we find Wilson in his office in town. Though his “deadly remark” has – at least for the time – ended his career as a lawyer, he is able to find work as an accountant. The scene begins with Wilson at his desk, poring over some records:

One sweltering afternoon – it was the first day of July, 1830 – he was at work over a set of tangled account books in his work-room, which looked westward over a stretch of vacant lots, when a conversation outside disturbed him. It was carried on in yells, which

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41 Ibid., 36.
42 According to Parker, Twain wrote the ending of the novel and then returned to rewrite this scene and the two that follow. That is to say, this scene was among the last written.
43 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 11.
showed that the people were not close together:

‘Say, Roxy, how does yo’ baby come on?’ This from the distant voice.

‘Fust-rate. How does you come on, Jasper?’ This yell was from close by.

‘Oh, I’s middlin’; hain’t got noth’n’ to complain of, I’s gwine to come a-court’n you bimeby, Roxy.’

‘You is, you black mud cat! Yah – yah – yah! I got somep’n’ better to do den ‘sociat’n’ wid niggers as black as you is. Is ole Miss Cooper’s Nancy done give you de mitten?’ Roxy followed this sally with another discharge of carefree laughter.

‘You’s jealous, Roxy, dat’s what’s de matter wid you, you hussy – yah – yah – yah! Dat’s de time I got you!’

‘Oh, yes, you got me, hain’t you. ’Clah to goodness if dat conceit o’yo’n strikes in, Jasper, it gwine to kill you sho.’ If you b’longed to me, I’d sell you down de river ’fo’ you git too fur gone. Fust time I runs acrost yo’ marster, I’s gwine to tell him so.’

Though Wilson can hear this dialogue “carried on in yells,” the speakers remain invisible to him. Twain’s emphasis on the loudness of the conversation serves to underscore Wilson’s blindness to the scene itself – his eyes focused instead on his “tangled account books.” But the reader – with eyes likewise focused on a book – is “blind” at this moment as well. Twain has pointedly withheld a visual description of these characters – that is, until Wilson walks to the window:

Wilson stepped to the window to observe the combatants; he could not work while their chatter continued. Over in the vacant lots was Jasper, young, coal black, and of magnificent build, sitting on a wheelbarrow in the pelting sun – at work, supposably, whereas he was in fact only preparing for it by taking an hour’s rest before beginning. In front of Wilson’s porch stood Roxy, with a local handmade baby wagon, in which sat her two charges – one at each end and facing each other. From Roxy’s manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show. She was of majestic form and stature, her attitudes were imposing and statuesque, and her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace. Her complexion was very fair, with the rosy glow of

44 Ibid., 13.
vigorous health in her cheeks, her face was full of character and expression, her eyes were brown and liquid, and she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown, but the fact was not apparent because her head was bound about with a checkered handkerchief and the hair was concealed under it. Her face was shapely, intelligent, and comely – even beautiful. She had an easy, independent carriage – when she was among her own caste – and a high and ‘sassy’ way, withal; but of course she was meek and humble enough where white people were.

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a Negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a Negro. He had blue eyes and flaxen curls like his white comrade, but even the father of the white child was able to tell the children apart – little as he had commerce with them – by their clothes; for the white babe wore ruffled soft muslin and a coral necklace, while the other wore merely a coarse tow-linen shirt which barely reached to its knees, and no jewelry.55

Twain deploys two competing definitions of color in this scene: one visual, referring to a character’s literal complexion; one a race designation based on “a fiction of law and custom.”46 In this scene, the two definitions are placed in direct conflict with one another: Roxy and Jasper are both black, but only one is black; the two children are both white, but only one is white. The explicit emphasis on the visual in this scene – on the visual distinction between Jasper’s “coal black” skin and Roxy’s “very fair” complexion; or on the visual similitude of the two white babies – thus serves to undermine the authority of the race designation. By evoking both definitions of color simultaneously, Twain produces a disjunction between two contradictory meanings, showing the term “black” to be an arbitrary signifier of race.

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46 I will, regrettably, be forced to use the novel’s reductive and harmful binary terms – “black” and “white” – throughout this essay. There is, unfortunately, no way to explain the novel’s work without adhering to this logic. The distress produced by being enjoined to participate in this system is, in fact, part of my claim.
But I would like to point to another comparison produced here, one modeled by the reader’s relation to Wilson, in the movement from a set of “tangled account books” to his position at the window. Roxy’s speech, short as it is, contains two references to the color of Jasper’s skin – “you black mud-cat”; “niggers as black as you” – a description that, Twain suggests, will have been imaginatively extended to Roxy as well. Indeed, by the time the narrator authoritatively describes the physical appearance of the characters – that is to say, by the time Wilson looks out his window – the reader is expected to have in some way already imaginatively visualized Roxy from her mere talk alone. Twain in fact explicitly articulates this expectation in the passage itself: as he puts it, “from Roxy’s manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not.” Notably, the “expectation” of “blackness” that Twain describes here refers specifically to an “expectation” about Roxy’s complexion; when Twain suggests that a “stranger” “would have expected her to be black, but she was not” he can only be referring to an expectation about the darkness of her skin – a “mud-cat” visual appearance that would in some way accord with the “manner” of her speech. The scene functions in the same way that a joke does – producing a first-, then a second take. And as in a joke, the reader will have had to make some kind of imaginative correction – one that navigates between black and white. In this transition, however brief, Twain suggests that the reader’s “picture” of Roxy will be formed – and then re-formed along new lines.

This scene, I will argue, presents the movement of the entire novel in miniature and a paradigm for understanding its work. Indeed, though any number of readers have commented upon the depiction of Roxy in this opening, it is hardly noted that the same structure is repeated


48 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 13.
throughout *Pudd’nhead*. In fact, though it has gone almost entirely remarked, Twain introduces Angelo and Luigi with precisely the same joke. The twins’ entrance into the novel rigorously repeats the structure of the opening tableau. When we meet Roxy, we are placed in the position of Wilson, a character who can “hear,” but not see. The introduction of the twins begins in the same manner: the reader is again placed in the position of a character who is furnished with words alone – in this case, the position of Aunt Patsy and Rowena. Though Patsy and Rowena have never set eyes on the twins, they pore over a letter from the men, hypothesizing upon their character and appearance. The reader is made to join in this activity: Twain includes a full copy of the letter in the text – like Patsy and Rowena, we have the twins’ words, but have not yet been provided with a visual description of the twins, and so cannot yet “see” them.

And here, as in the opening scene, Twain elaborately extends the time between the reader’s first encounter with a character’s words and the time when the reader is provided with an authoritative visual description of the character. Aunt Patsy, Rowena and the rest of the town read and re-read the letter from Luigi and Angelo, intently trying to deduce some knowledge about the twins from their words – their “lovely names,” their “gracious tone,” their “smooth and practiced style.” After three pages spent describing the town’s eager anticipation, detailing how often the letter is read, elaborating on how there is “such a cruel long time to wait,” the twins’ arrival is then delayed by weather – an utterly irrelevant plot detail that nevertheless serves to further delay their appearance into the text. “Everybody will be dying to see them,” Rowena

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49 In Herschel Parker’s assessment of *Pudd’nhead*, the presence of the Italian twins is amongst the most egregious failures of Twain’s composition process. Indeed, their role in the plot is almost entirely negligible; Twain seems to have kept them in the text simply in order to present their hands in the final trial scene – a clunky device that helps communicate the point that even twins do not share a “natal autograph.” Yet, as we shall see, their arrival in Dawson’s Landing represents a crucial element in what one might term the imaginative “education” of the reader.

50 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 38.

51 Ibid.
says, a comment that applies to the now-impatient reader as well as to the town. Finally, the two arrive:

The rain and thunder were booming yet, and the anxious family were still waiting, still hoping. At last there was a knock at the door, and the family jumped to open it. Two negro men entered, each carrying a trunk, and proceeded upstairs toward the guest room. Then entered the twins – the handsomest, the best dressed, the most distinguished-looking pair of young fellows the West had ever seen. One was a little fairer than the other, but otherwise they were exact duplicates.

The joke, of course, is that the reader will briefly be led into the perception that the twins are “two negro men” – a perception that is immediately corrected in the next sentence: “Then entered the twins.” Indeed, the “two negro men” are brought into the novel for the sake of the joke alone. They appear in the narrative only to disappear instantly from the novel; they are never mentioned again.

Twain here repeats the movement of the opening scene, this time as a parody. Aunt Patsy and Rowena are of course naïve readers; they assume that the “style” of the twins’ writing will in some way be literally indicative of the twins’ appearance. “The letter was read and re-read until it was nearly worn out,” Twain writes, punning on the way in which re-reading might “wear out” both the material of the letter (its trite meaning) and its physical material (paper).

Though the extended set-up of the scene places the reader in the position of the two women, it also offers an opportunity for ironic distance from them. If anything, the reader expects that the twins’ appearance will in some way present a comeuppance to Patsy and Rowena’s unsophisticated assessment of literary style.

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 39.
54 Ibid., 38.
And yet, though we may laugh at Patsy and Rowena’s naïve expectations, before the joke is even completed, the joke is already on us. If the reader is led, momentarily, to believe that the “two negro men” represent the surprise that Patsy and Rowena have coming, in fact, that surprise is built for the reader alone. Twain thus uses our own readerly “expectation” – an expectation prompted by the narrator’s tone, by our own experience with plot, by our feeling for the genre of the book – to assert not our distance from Patsy and Rowena’s interpretive errors, but to show that we too are subject to similar failures.

And here, as in the opening scene of the novel – as throughout Pudd’nhead Wilson – Twain uses this technique in order to produce an error. Patsy and Rowena must wait for the twins’ arrival; similarly, the lag between the reader’s encounter with Roxy’s words and the description of Roxy’s appearance leaves ample time for false speculation. If, in the end, we are momentarily “duped” into mistaking a “white” character for “black” in this scene, it is mistake we have made before – with Roxy.

In fact, I will argue, it is a mistake we will continue to make. As we shall see, Twain coercively deploys our position as a reader in order to place us in what might be called a false position – a position collusive with racism. Indeed, in Roxy, I will argue, Twain enlists the reader in the very same race thinking that condemns both Tom and Chambers at the end of the novel. In this way, it becomes possible to understand Pudd’nhead Wilson as more than a mere parody of the logic of racial “type,” but rather as an effort to literally, materially intervene in the ingrained habits of thought that underwrite the authority of racial type as such.

In order to recover the rhetorical meaning of this “error,” we must attend not to the narrative action in the novel (to the flirtation between Jasper and Roxy, say – which goes nowhere), but rather to its underlying structure. Notably, in the opening tableau, Twain stages
two processes of comparison. The first comparison is staged in the scenic space of the novel: Jasper and Roxy framed by Wilson’s window; the babies facing one another in their wagon. The second comparison, by contrast, is staged in the reader’s experience in narrative time: an imagined “black mud cat” Roxy becoming “very fair” – that is to say, white. In the pages that follow, I will begin by addressing each of these comparisons separately. As we shall see, these two axes of comparison – black baby/white baby; black Roxy/white Roxy – mutually reinforce one another. The meaning of the first comparison, staged in pictorial space, is that race is a “fiction of law and custom” – an insight familiar to many critical accounts of the novel. The second comparison, staged in narrative time, however, bears a far more radical insight – not that race is a “fiction,” but that fiction literally makes race.

I. Black Baby/White Baby: The Spatial Comparison

From the outset, the novel informs us that the work of reading will be a process of picturing. Twain announces this intention himself in the very first line of the novel’s prologue: though he is “ignorant of legal matters,” he says, he has attempted to “photograph a court scene with his pen.” The suggestion, of course, is that the reader will be privy to this “photograph” – and many others – in the text to come. As Michael Bell has observed, photography was one of Twain’s favored metaphors for the craft of fiction; Twain’s reference to his written “photograph” can be understood as a classic expression of the realist intent to make the reader “see.”

And yet, I would like to locate Pudd’nhead Wilson in another explicitly visual literary tradition, one that invokes a process of picturing in different register – that of the sentimental novel. In the opening scene above, Twain draws upon a robust pictorial trope of the sentimental

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56 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 3.
57 John Bird has suggested that the best way to read the opening pages of the novel is “to imagine that we are watching a film… composed of a selection of contiguous images” (Metaphor, 148). The novel’s opening consists of a series of “images in succession” (Ibid.). John Bird, Mark Twain and Metaphor (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007).
59 As Bell has observed, photography was one of Twain’s favored metaphors for the craft of fiction (Problem, 42). In 1879, Twain praised Howells in these terms: “It is all such truth — truth to life; everywhere your pen falls it leaves a photograph” (qtd. in Bell, Problem, 42). As Bell notes, “the realistic photograph” has often been understood as Twain’s alternative to “the distortions of the Old Masters to ‘sentimentality & sloppy romantics’” (Ibid.).
60 And yet, as Bell quite rightly points out, in spite of Twain’s famous distaste for “sentimentality & sloppy romantics,” Twain often drew from the tradition of sentimental fiction. As Bell notes, there are many un-ironic evocations of the sentimental to be found in Twain’s later work. In Connecticut Yankee, written in 1889, for example, “there is the slave about to separated from his wife, who ’strained her to his breast and smothered her face and the child’s with kisses, and washed them with the rain of his tears’ – this reaction standing in pointed contrast to the ‘hardened’ indifference of the observing pilgrims; ‘I knew I should never get his picture out of his mind again,’ Hank writes, ‘and there it is to this day, to wring my heart-strings whenever I think of it’” (Problem, 62). The mode of this scene, Bell observes, is “sentimental protest, in the mode of Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (Ibid.). As Bell suggests, “Hank’s overt attacks on aristocratic abuses almost involve quite flagrant – and flagrantly conventional – appeals to sentiment” (Ibid., 63).

Notably, in both of these traditions, the production of feeling is linked to the seeing of pictures. “There is the slave,” Twain writes, pointing to a tableau, a “picture” that Hank will never get out of his head. Indeed, Twain’s repeated use of the photograph as a metaphor for the task of writing need not be understood as realist at all; the idea that an author’s work is one of creating “photographs” with a “pen,” is fully compatible with the sentimental call for the production of a “daguerreotype” in fiction. As we shall see, in Pudd’nhead, Twain draws both on the pictorial logic of sentimental fiction, and a pictorial tradition which accompanied it.
tradition: the comparison between white and black. The scene is staged as a tableau: two figures are framed by Wilson’s window, one dark and one light, set against the backdrop of the “vacant lots.” Twain here emphasizes the terms of visual comparison. Indeed, though there is some suggestion of a “court’n’” plot to come, Jasper only appears once again in the story, when Roxy briefly calls on “the black giant Jasper”; his only purpose in the narrative seems to be to provide a visual foil for Roxy, a way of emphasizing her contrastingly light complexion – her “rosy glow.”

The “window” device was a technique that Harriet Beecher Stowe used often in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* – a novel that Twain’s readers would almost certainly have encountered. From the beginning, then, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* operates in Stowe’s literary mode, one that explicitly and even theatrically cues the reader to “look upon” the scenes presented. Indeed, Twain’s initial description of the two baby boys directly references *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Roxy’s child, recall, had blue eyes and flaxen curls like his white comrade, but even the father of the white child was able to tell the children apart – little as he had commerce with them – by their clothes; for the white babe wore ruffled soft muslin and a coral necklace, while the other wore merely a coarse tow-linen shirt which barely reached to its knees, and no jewelry. Twain’s inclusion of “a coral necklace” in this passage is precise echo of a “coral necklace” that appears in Stowe’s account of Topsy and Eva – perhaps the most famous instance of black-and-white “twins” in American literature.

Though a number of scholars have read Twain’s novel in the larger context of Stowe’s work, the first pages of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I will argue, present a far more direct re-writing of

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60 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 13. In earlier drafts, Jasper took a more substantial role; in the final version, he plays no part in the plot.

61 Ibid., 13-14.
Uncle Tom’s Cabin than has previously been acknowledged. It will perhaps be helpful here to set Stowe’s “Topsy” chapter aside Twain’s early passages. Stowe’s chapter opens with her notorious description of the “little negro girl”:

She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment at the wonders of the new Mas’r’s parlor, displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth. Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity. She was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; and stood with her hands demurely folded before her.

Shortly after, Topsy falsely confesses that she has stolen a coral necklace from Eva:

‘Laws, Missis! I took Miss Eva’s red thing she war on her neck.’ …

Just at this moment, Eva came innocently into the room, with the identical coral necklace on her neck.

‘Why, Eva, where did you get your necklace?’ said Miss Ophelia.

‘Get it? Why, I’ve had it on all day,’ said Eva.

Directly followed by Stowe’s well-known set-piece:

Eva stood looking at Topsy.

There stood the two children representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They

62 While a number of critics have juxtaposed Pudd’nhead and Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the focus has largely been on Stowe’s mulatta characters, rather than upon Topsy. Myra Jehlen, for example, includes a discussion of Stowe — and even directly cites Twain’s “coral necklace” scene — but never makes the link. Myra Jehlen, “The Ties That Bind: Race and Sex in Pudd’nhead Wilson,” in Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, Tables of Variants, Criticism, 2nd ed., ed. Sidney E. Berger, 411-425 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).


64 Ibid., 360.
stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil and vice!\textsuperscript{65}

Stowe here employs – and in some ways canonizes – a literary trope that stages racial difference as a distinction of visual color. For each of these “representatives of the two extremes,” Stowe begins her description with a reference to the skin of the child: one “fair,” one “black.” This color term is extended metonymically to a description of each child’s character, then to the larger characteristics of two races – “the Saxon” and “the Afric.” Thus, the mere evocation of visual distinction – Topsy, “one of the blackest of her race,” and Eva, “always dressed in white … without contracting spot or stain” – is freighted with an intense symbolic register that extends even to hell and heaven: the world of “goblins” and “angels,” “serpents” and “doves.”\textsuperscript{66}

By the late nineteenth century, the Topsy and Eva passages were almost proverbially well known. Indeed, one would hardly need to have read Stowe’s novel in order to be familiar with the scene – it was amongst the most popularly illustrated in the novel. Images of Topsy and Eva – including some with a white child wearing a coral necklace – were commonplace.\textsuperscript{67} (\textit{Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7.}) These illustrations circulated independently, as if they were a self-evident equivalent for the story, a full substitution for the text itself.\textsuperscript{68} Indeed, the very logic of Stowe’s text would encourage such a substitution. The structure of Stowe’s scene suggests that the reader, by merely

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 361.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 356; 344; 364.

\textsuperscript{67} Notably, Topsy is often pictured in a striped pink-and-white dress, similar to one that Tom dons when he masquerades as a woman in order to pilfer the town.

\textsuperscript{68} As Adam Sonstegard has written, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} was “never a purely verbal phenomenon” (\textit{“Artistic Liberty,”} 507). Independent depictions of famous passages from \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} had begun to circulate even before the final chapters of the novel appeared in print (Ibid.). Adam Sonstegard, \textit{“Artistic Liberty and Slave Imagery: ‘Mark Twain’s Illustrator,’ E. W. Kemble, Turns to Harriet Beecher Stowe,” Nineteenth-Century Literature} 63, no. 4 (March 2009): 499-542.
“looking” upon these two “representatives,” would gain an immediate understanding of the tragic distortions of slavery.

In this respect, the illustrations to the book do indeed serve as a fair substitution for Stowe’s novel: the visual contrast in color between the “black” Topsy and the “white” Eva functions as a fully articulated allegory. The illustrations, like Stowe’s novel, collapse three registers of meanings – color, character, race – under the labels “black” and “white” – a symbolic integration made manifest in the girls’ skin tone.

Figure 4. “Eva and Topsy,” Stannard & Dixon (1852).
Figure 5. “Topsy and Eva, with Miss Ophelia and St. Clare watching the girls,” from Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853 edition).

Figure 6. “Topsy and Eva with Miss Ophelia,” from Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853 Pictures and Stories edition).
In *Pudd’nhead*, Twain presents the same set piece – twice over and doubly inverted.69 Like Stowe, Twain stages an explicitly visual comparison between a black child and a white child – “facing each other” in the same carriage. Twain takes pains to indicate that the two children share the same scenic space, further emphasizing the pictorial logic of comparison. As in Stowe’s scene, one child wears a coral necklace – one child does not; and yet for Twain, this is the only mark of their racial distinction. “‘How do you tell them apart, Roxy, when they haven’t any clothes on?’” Wilson asks.70 By deploying the black/white trope – without the literal

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69 Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is much more to say about the connection between *Pudd’nhead* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Notably, Stowe’s St. Clare is himself a twin – he and his brother are described in terms similar to that of Angelo and Luigi, one “light,” one “dark”:

> My brother and I were twins; and they say, you know, that twins ought to resemble each other; but we were in all points a contrast. He had black, fiery eyes, coal-black hair, a strong, fine Roman profile, and a rich brown complexion. I had blue eyes, golden hair, a Greek outline, and fair complexion. He was active and observing, I dreamy and inactive. He was generous to his friends and equals, but proud, dominant, overbearing, to inferiors, and utterly unmerciful to whatever set itself up against him. Truthful we both were; he from pride and courage, I from a sort of abstract ideality. We loved each other about as boys generally do, – off and on, and in general; – he was my father’s pet, and I my mother’s. (*Uncle Tom*, 333-4)

70 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 14.
color – Twain heightens the irony of his comparison: The two “representatives” of their respective races, black and white, both in fact, look the same.

Twain thus deploys the mode of visual comparison in order to unbind its terms. The two children are presented in the same carriage, both with “blue eyes and flaxen curls.” The shared “whiteness” of the children conflicts with Twain’s reference to “the white child.” Twain’s explicit attention to the visual appearance of the children – one that conflicts with the race designation – works to un-tether race from color and so too to unravel the metonymic structure that links them.

Indeed, this insight – and the method of visual comparison that produces it – is dramatized within the world of novel. For Roxy, as for the reader, the act of placing the children “side by side” suggests the fact that racial identity is an arbitrary social construction.71 The coral necklace appears a second time in Pudd’nhead – when Roxy swaps the children:

[Roxy] stepped over and glanced at the other infant; she flung a glance back at her own; then one more at the heir of the house. Now a strange light dawned in her eyes, and in a moment she was lost in thought. She seemed in a trance; when she came out of it, she muttered, ‘When I ’uz a-washin’ ’em in de tub, yistiddy, he own pappy asked me which of ’em was his’n.’ … She undressed Thomas à Becket, stripping him of everything, and put the tow-linen shirt on him. She put his coral necklace on her own child’s neck. Then she placed the children side by side, and after earnest inspection she muttered – ‘Now who would b’lieve clo’es could do de like o’ dat? Dog my cats if it ain’t all I kin do to tell t’ other fum which, let alone his pappy.’72

Twain here dramatizes the process of visual comparison that he has already invited us to undertake: Roxy “glanced” at one child, “flung a glance back at her own,” then glanced again at the other. This series of looks, back and forth, directly results in Roxy’s realization – and the

71 Ibid., 22.
72 Ibid., 22.
resulting swap. The scene is an explicit revision of Stowe: whereas in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy never actually acquires Eva’s coral necklace, in *Pudd’nhead*, the white child’s necklace is in fact conferred upon the black child’s neck. The ease of the switch parodies the fully integrated racial identities of Topsy and Eva, whose bodies are marked in ways that go well beyond Topsy’s “filthy, ragged garment” and Eva’s pristine “white dress.”

“‘Who would b’lieve clo’es could do de like o’ dat?’ Roxy asks; in Stowe’s novel a mere “coral necklace” could not.

Thus, in *Pudd’nhead*, the “side by side” visual comparison does not inform us of differences between the races, but rather suggests their equivalence. In this respect, the spatial comparison between Tom and Chambers can be understood not only as an exposure of the “fiction of law and custom” that produces racial identity, but as an exposure of the *fictionality* of this identity – its underwriting by allegorical meanings, drawn from *fiction* itself.

And yet, though Roxana’s exchange of the children would seem to suggest that race is an arbitrary social, linguistic and cultural designation, the rest of the novel seems to work to re-inscribe race into the body that Roxana frees it from. Thus, as Henry Wonham observes, though “the success of Roxy’s revolutionary act of racial inversion might at first appear to suggest that for Twain the color line is deceptively fluid,” by the end of the novel, “the color line reasserts itself even more insidiously than before.”

Indeed, Twain’s ending restores an almost extreme version of Stowe’s allegory, bringing character in line with color in deeply uncomfortable ways. As Michael Rogin has written, Twain made Tom’s “‘one drop of Negro blood’ … into the sign and explanation of his guilt. That is not just what Roxana, Tom’s mother says; it is what the novel says. Tom is guilty because he is

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73 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 351; 401.

black; he is guilty from birth, from his mother’s birth and from her mother’s birth before her.”

In the final plot twist, Tom’s personal character (he is a thief and murderer) and his racial identity (a slave and a black man) are rendered homologous; in the moment of Wilson’s revelation, Tom’s “criminal tendencies” are written upon his face:

‘Valet de Chambre, negro and slave, – falsely called Thomas à Becket Driscoll, – make upon the window that fingerprints that will hang you!’

Tom turned his ashen face imploringly toward the speaker, made some impotent movement with his white lips, then slid limp and lifeless to the floor.

Wilson broke the awed silence with the words –
‘There is no need. He has confessed.’

Here Tom’s “ashen face” serves as a reminder of his white appearance, but also becomes an indicator of his guilt – a guilt that coincides with a revelation of his racial identity. If Roxy’s swap of the babies represents an attempt to unbind the terms “black” and “white” not only from law, but from the symbolic register of “goblins” and “angels,” the end of the novel restores both the legal designation and the symbolic one. Indeed, this moment serves as a deeply insidious inversion of the paradigm that Stowe modeled: here the universe of “serpents” and “doves,” is worked backward to imply color. The guilty man is made black.

The idea that Twain cannot – and yet must – contain the force of both Roxy and the racial insight she bears has become perhaps the most compelling explanation for this ending, which presents a rather horrifying fulfillment of Roxy’s worst fear: Tom’s “one drop” is revealed, and he is sent down the river. As Carolyn Porter has written, Roxy’s action seems to become a “radical and disruptive force” in the novel – one that Twain begins “violently warding off even

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75 Rogin, “Francis Galton,” 74.
76 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 176.
as it looms more powerfully all along.”

In this reading, echoed by critics such as Myra Jehlen, Forrest Robinson, and Susan Gillman, Roxana’s swap of the children presents a challenge to Twain’s own understanding of race. “What Mark Twain discovered in his own fiction was the constructed and artificial character of essential social measures of identity,” Gillman writes. And yet, though Twain “discovered” this insight, Gillman suggests, he was not entirely able to face up to the “unintentional disclosures of his own writing.” As Robinson puts it, Twain’s ending exhibits a kind of “bad faith.”

… as he released Roxy, fully formed and irresistibly in motion, into his narrative, Mark Tain responded to a simultaneous and countering impulse to contain her, to blunt and obscure the transforming, profoundly subversive thrust of her story. The mystery plot admirably answered this need. It filled narrative space and time, thus diminishing the full force of the race-slavery plot, and it was the justification for the happily distracting conclusion. Thus the confusion of having it both ways served as a stay against the painful clarity of Roxy’s story, and the savage indictment of white slave culture that it bore with it. This proud, powerful slave forced her way, almost literally against the maker’s consciousness, into the center of Pudd’nhead Wilson; Mark Twain surrendered to her, and to the imperious, deeply subversive creative impulse that she expressed, but only on condition that her story could not, in any conventional sense, be completed.

From this vantage, if the novel in some way succeeds in presenting a moral about the social construction of race, it is only in spite of Twain himself, whose very attempts to “contain” and “blunt” the force of this realization become a mark of its latent power. Though Pudd’nhead

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79 Ibid., 104.


81 Ibid., 28-29.
Wilson may yield an insight about racial thinking, this can only be understood as a “disclosure” that Twain himself was unable or unwilling to confront.

And yet, I will argue, if the assertion that race is a fictional – that is to say, “imaginary” – construction does not bear itself out over the course of the novel, this is because this is not the novel’s final insight, but rather its operating premise. Notably, what is ordinarily taken to be the major insight of the text – that race is “produced” through structures of language, embedded within a social practice – is present in the first scene of the novel. Indeed, Twain’s much-quoted phrase – “fiction of law and custom” – is used at the very moment he introduces Roxana; and as the many readings above imply, Roxana’s very existence – a woman who is only one-sixteenth “black” and yet “black” – ought to be proof enough of the “constructed” nature of racial identity.

And yet, while the reader is repeatedly informed of this insight, as we shall see, mere understanding will be demonstrated to be inadequate in this novel. If race is informed by fictions, the link between race and fiction is used in this novel not to undermine racial authority, but rather, to repeatedly demonstrate how very serious, ingrained, and abiding those fictions can be.

As I have suggested, Twain repeatedly pairs a spatial comparison with one that occurs in narrative time. And indeed, this is just what we find here; Twain presents a second re-writing of Stowe in this scene, parallel to the first. Roxy exchanges the clothes of the children, exchanging their race in the meantime; but before Roxy changes the children’s clothes, she changes as well. The moment directly precedes Roxy’s swap of the children and participates in the same visual logic of comparison:

She stared toward the door, crooning to the child and hushing it; midway she stopped, suddenly. She had caught sight of her new Sunday gown – a cheap curtain-calico thing, a conflagration of gaudy colors and fantastic figures. She surveyed it wistfully, longingly.

‘Hain’t ever wore it yet,’ she said, ’en it’s just lovely.’ Then she nodded her head
in response to a pleasant idea, and added, ‘No, I ain’t gwine to be fished out, wid everybody lookin’ at me, in dis mis’able ole linsey-woolsey.’

She put down the child and made the change. She looked in the glass and was astonished at her beauty. She resolved to make her death toilet perfect. She took off her handkerchief turban and dressed her glossy wealth of hair ‘like white folks’; she added some odds and ends of rather lurid ribbon and a spray of atrocious artificial flowers; finally she threw over her shoulders a fluffy thing called a ‘cloud’ in that day, which was of a blazing red complexion. Then she was ready for the tomb.  

The scene is overlaid with lines of sight: Roxy “caught sight” of the dress, “surveyed it,” “looked in the glass,” when her “eye fell” upon her son; she then changes his clothes as well. Looking at the two children, “side by side” their equivalence is revealed: here the action – mirror-self-mirror – takes the same form, and yields for Roxy the same insight of racial equivalence. Indeed, it is only after she has transferred a “red thing” to her own neck – that is to say, taken on the role of the white – that she understands the possibility of performing the same “switch” on her own son. When Roxy dresses herself “‘like white folks,’” she reveals to herself the fact that color is a social construction. Gazing upon a woman who is no longer marked by the “ole linsey-woolsey” that signifies her race, Roxy is “astonished at her beauty.”

And yet, though this may be Roxy’s insight, what she herself sees in the mirror is quite at odds with the narrator’s implied description of her appearance. Indeed, the image that Twain conjures here is not that of a white woman, but that of Topsy. Twain here presents a sequence of

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82 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 20.
83 Ibid.
84 In Linda A. Morris’s reading of the scene, “what Roxana sees when she looks into the mirror is her own beauty – that is, her constructed white self – in contrast to the equally constructed black image reflected back to her by Southern society. The faintly mocking tone of the narrator goes unheard by Roxana, who is clearly pleased by the image of herself that she creates. This image empowers her, just as later dressing as a man will empower her” (“Beneath the Veil,” 385). And yet, I would suggest, the “tone of the narrator” is far more than “faintly mocking” here. Linda A. Morris, “Beneath the Veil: Clothing, Race, and Gender in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,” in *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, Tables of Variants, Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Sidney E. Berger, 381-394 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).
events that directly parallel the sequence in Stowe’s novel: In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Miss Ophelia catches Topsy stealing a ribbon, shortly followed by a scene in which Topsy appears with Miss Ophelia’s “very best scarlet India Canton crape shawl wound round her head for a turban, going on with her rehearsals before the glass in great style.”85 In *Pudd’nhead*, the sequence is the same: Roxy is confronted about stealing; she then adorns herself with a “lurid ribbon,” “threw over her shoulders” a cloth of “a blazing red complexion” and “looked in the glass.”86

Figure 8. “Topsy with Miss Ophelia’s Wardrobe,” from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852 edition).

85 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 366.

86 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 20. The mirror scene is a traditional trope of mulatto fiction. As Sinead Moynihan observes, “In passing narratives, the mirror thus represents the subject’s uncanny confrontation with a racial identity that does not seem to correspond to his or her physical appearance” (“History,” 818-19). Sinéad Moynihan, “History Repeating Itself: Passing, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, and *The President’s Daughter*,” *Callaloo* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 809-821.
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“Topsy at the Looking Glass,”
from Uncle Tom’s Cabin
(1853 Pictures and Stories edition).

“Topsy’s Mischief,”
from Uncle Tom’s Cabin
(1888 edition).
This scene – Topsy at the mirror – was among the most commonly illustrated in editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Indeed, the illustrations for this scene in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* could almost be directly set into *Pudd’nhead Wilson* – if, that is, the entire moral meaning of the passage did not depend upon the reader’s *recollection that Roxy looks white*.

As in the opening scene of the novel, Twain here again pairs two axes of comparison: one in space, and one in time. As we have seen, the spatial comparison – black baby/white baby – works to suggest that a racial designation is an arbitrary signifier, all one need do is change a “coral necklace.” The second comparison – between black Roxy/white Roxy, set in narrative time – likewise indicates that racial identity is a matter of “fiction,” but whereas the first, spatial comparison frames this insight as a matter of *understanding*, the second comparison frames this

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87 It is not perhaps coincidental that Twain has chosen two scenes from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that were often *illustrated*. The two Topsy evocations in *Pudd’nhead* would be familiar to Twain’s readers not only through their reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but through a set of iconic *images*, drawn from Stowe’s novel.

88 Only a few years before *Pudd’nhead Wilson* was serialized, E. W. Kemble, Twain’s favored illustrator, produced a number of images for a new edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* – one of which depicted Topsy dancing, in a shawl.
insight as a matter of *experience*. That is to say, if, by looking upon two white boys, one of
whom is black, the reader is made to *acknowledge* that race is a linguistic construction, a matter
of mere labeling, this insight is here *demonstrated* for us over the course of the passage itself. In
Roxy’s movement between black and white, race is *literally* shown to be produced – and
reproduced – through structures of fiction – a “lurid ribbon,” a “red thing.” If race is “made”
through fictions, through linguistic designations, here we observe that “making” *first hand, in
our own experience of the passage*.

And yet, while the *mode* of this experience in racial “construction” confirms the insight
produced by the first, its *moral* valence runs in precisely the opposite direction. As Twain rather
viciously demonstrates here, to simply assert *that* race is a construction – social, legal, linguistic
– does not sufficiently undermine the authority *of* that construction. The inversion here is
precise: Twain here deploys the same literary structure, the same literary allusion, and the same
literary device that *yields* Roxy’s insight in order to *alienate* the reader from her position. Thus,
in the very moment that the novel seems to assert that race is merely a kind of *fiction*, Twain
deploys the *fictionality* of racial identity – its deep roots in the structures and conventions of
literature – to undercut the force of this claim. Roxy, like Topsy before the mirror, is here a black
in “whiteface,” a role that serves not to emphasize racial fluidity, but to erode its very
possibility.89 Indeed, though the narrator’s evocation of Topsy in this scene *demonstrates first-
hand* for the reader the “constructed” nature of racial identity, it also shows those “constructions”
to be rather more abiding than Roxy herself seems to imagine.90

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89 Joe Fulton describes the speech that Roxy delivers here as a “white man’s black woman’s whiteface speech” (*Ethical*, 126). Joe B. Fulton, *Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997). See also Sundquist, “Mark Twain,” 48.

90 It should be noted that the Topsy images of 1852 are far less damaging than those of the 1880s – by 1923, they would become fully grotesque caricatures. In this respect, I would suggest, Twain showed himself to be an extraordinary theorist of visual culture – and one of its most prescient critics.
By using the same reasoning to yield directly conflicting insights, Twain creates a contradiction – one that the reader is enjoined to resolve. Twain here creates a kind of moral “eddy” in the text; as we shall see, this effect is repeated throughout the novel, and I will argue, is constitutive of the novel’s work. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written in a mode that asked “readers and illustrators to pretend that they are directly seeing, not merely reading about” the narrative presented.\(^91\) In this way, Adam Sonstegard observes, Stowe “invited readers to imagine that they were seeing slavery firsthand.”\(^92\) The sentimental education that readers received from this encounter was one that sought to – and by some counts, did – end slavery. Thirty years after Emancipation, the Civil War had ended, but the “race question” was as urgent as ever: the early 1890s saw the most racial lynchings in American history. Twain, I will argue, writing in Stowe’s rhetorical mode, sought, like Stowe, to produce in readers a “firsthand” experience of the distortions and horrors of the race problem in America. In the case of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, however, it would be a “vision” appropriate to Reconstruction – a vision, we shall see, not of slavery, but of racism.\(^93\)

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Drawing on the work of John Dewey, Jane Thrailkill has argued that literary realism has too long been associated with “‘cognitive value’ rather than aesthetic experience: with the rational, and

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\(^91\) Sonstegard, “Artistic Liberty,” 505.

\(^92\) Ibid., 507.

\(^93\) As Jehlen has observed, “for Stowe, countering racism was incidental, indeed she had only a limited interest in doing so, up to the point of establishing the humanity of the slaves in order to argue her central case, which was against slavery” (“Ties,” 413). By contrast, she notes, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* “is only peripherally concerned with the atrocities of the slave system” (“Ties,” 413).
rationalizing, mind instead of the feeling body.”94 Thrailkill’s effort to restore a sense of the “emotive” begins with an account of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).95 For Thrailkill, Twain’s novel exemplifies a shift “away from a concern with realism to the enterprise of realization, the coming to consciousness of an experience, which entails being ‘moved’ in the dual sense of emotionally engaged and repositioned with respect to the world.”96 The process of “realization” is thus “dynamically present in the ups and downs of readerly emotion,” a process modeled by Huck’s fit of laughter when he “realizes” that a drunk in the circus ring is no drunk at all.97

And yet, though Thrailkill’s account draws on Dewey’s psychology, she makes little note of the context in which Dewey himself used the term, one that appeared often in his lectures of the 1890s. Indeed, it is worth restoring the rigorous specificity of this term for Dewey – and, I would argue, for Twain as well. For Dewey, the “feeling” produced by a literary text was not set in opposition to its “‘cognitive value,’” but was rather produced through the “rational and

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95 Thrailkill also draws on the psychology of William James, though largely through the work of Gerald E. Myers – whose account of James’s *Principles*, though estimable, is at times misleading. While I am deeply sympathetic to Thrailkill’s argument, and find much to commend there, I believe that her emphasis on emotion in the work of James and Dewey (a point to key her claim) is crucially misguided.

Both men do indeed understand feeling to be central to an aesthetically oriented psychology – but feeling need not be synonymous with emotion. In fact, the disaggregation of feeling from emotion is one of the most important tenets of their work. Indeed, it might be said that the important distinction for James is that feeling and emotion are not synonymous.

James, we shall see, was keen to expand the very idea of “feeling” to include all manner of indescribable, yet observable sensory states, present in the body, but without a real name. Thus, for example, Thrailkill’s suggestion that, for James, “cognition provided snapshots” while “feeling offered a moving picture” is one that I will contest in my third chapter. Her reading of “On a Certain Blindness” – in which James’s description of the “zest or tingle” of reality for her constitutes an “emotion” – likewise confuses emotion with feeling. Indeed, insofar as the “feeling” of “zest” can be assimilated to literary feeling, I will argue, it is through an account of the embodied mind, rather than through a model of emotion. Jane Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

96 Thrailkill, “Emotive Realism,” 366.

97 Ibid.
rationalizing” structures of an embodied mind. Likewise, I would argue, if *Pudd’nhead Wilson* models a process of “realization” it is precisely *not* in the “ups and downs of readerly emotion” that Thrailkill describes in *Huck Finn*; rather, if there is to be a “realization” in this novel – moral, rational, or sympathetic – it will be a “realization” in Dewey’s true sense of the term, one executed through the deliberate and repeated exercise of the imagination.

For Dewey, “realization” was a process explicitly mediated through mental imagery. As he explained in his notes for a lecture delivered in 1895, “imagination [is] the medium of realization.” Indeed, for Dewey, “imagination” and “realization” were definitionally intertwined:

Imagination. Specific imagery, not faculty in general. A power of realization, not of making real artificial. Hence its importance: Mean term between ignorance and realization, between alien material and comprehension in self. It is the mental machinery. Dewey uses the term “realization” in two ways here: First, as a description of the literal process of conjuring “specific imagery,” something akin to the process of “visualization.” “Realization” in this first sense refers to a *concrete* and defined imaginative process. Indeed, throughout Dewey’s educational lectures of the 1890s, the term “imagination” was narrowly defined as the “realization” of images; as he explained in a later lecture, imagination was a “power of imaging” – “the power rather of realizing what is not present than of making up anything which is unreal.”

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99 Ibid.

In its second use here, “realization” is used to describe an insight – a new understanding counter to a previous “ignorance.” For Dewey, these two meanings were inextricably linked. Indeed, the literal process of imaginative “realization” that occurred when mentally constructing an image, was, for Dewey, the same means by which one came to larger understanding – the way in which “alien material” was brought into “comprehension in the self.” Thus Dewey’s suggestion that “imagination” was “the medium of realization” emphasized the concrete processes by which an insight could occur: a process of deliberately constructing mental images, a process performed in the mind, repeatedly, over time.101

For Dewey, mental imagery thus played a crucial role in the process of moral, rational and sympathetic education – as it was the means by which “realization” was effected. As Dewey explained, “imagery is the mechanism through which growth in knowledge is maintained. It is the medium of learning and hence of teaching.”102 In this sense, “imagination” – in the literal sense of the “power of imaging” – could be said to be “the sole internal instrument of instruction. Learning as medium between knowledge and ignorance corresponds to imagination.”103

In this emphasis on mental imagery, Dewey drew upon the psychological discourse of imagination – a field by then more than a decade old. Indeed, Dewey opened the lecture with a synopsis of Galton’s early investigations in mental imagery; he sent attendees home with some “exercises” drawn from the breakfast-table questionnaire itself:

Take familiar objects like your breakfast table, and the face of your watch and note carefully how well you can visualize it; noting

http://library.nlx.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/xtf/view?docId=dewey_ii/dewey_ii.37.xml;chunk.id=div.lw.17.73;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.lw.17.72;brand=default;query=%20educational%20lectures%20before%20brigham%20young%20academy.

101 Dewey, “Educational Psychology.”
102 Ibid.
103 Dewey, “Educational Lectures”; “Educational Psychology.”
1. **Completeness**: How much can you see at once? Does it come as a whole, or by parts? Can you hold the parts together if you try, or does one go as another comes, etc.?

2. **Definiteness** of outlines, and details of patterns, etc. **Vividness** of colors and degree of illumination.

3. Do you image involuntarily, or does it take effort? Where do you place yourself? Does the image change unless you try to hold it? Do you keep your attention fixed upon one part of it, or do you go from one part to another of it?\(^{104}\)

The idea that imaginative “realization” might require some kind of “exercise” – that it might both *be* a practice, and *demand* practice – was novel to this period. Galton’s early statistical aggregations had opened up the possibility that each individual might undertake an introspective investigation of his or her own mental capacity. Galton divided his results into octiles, with characteristic responses in each sector; armed with this, and Galton’s list of questions, an individual could assess his or her own imaginative disposition. By ranking oneself on scales of “illumination,” “definition” and “colouring,” as well as category of image type – visual, audile, motile, tactile – one could identify one’s own native capacities; such a self-description would provide a previously unknowable sense of one’s place within the broad range of imaginative experience.\(^{105}\)

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\(^{104}\) Dewey, “Educational Psychology.” At other times, Dewey would conduct an informal breakfast-table inquiry in class, with a show of hands. Thus in 1901, Dewey began a lecture on Imagination with a synopsis of Galton’s study; he conducted an informal survey of the lecture’s attendees, asking “who, among those present, can see this morning’s breakfast table and see it very definitely all at once … A few. How many saw very little of it? A comparatively small number. How many got the lights and shades? About a quarter of those here” ("Educational Lectures").

\(^{105}\) Over the course of the next decade, this type of introspective investigation became widely integrated into educational practice. As William James observed in his 1892 series of *Talks to Teachers*,

> One of the most important discoveries of the ‘scientific’ sort that have recently been made in psychology is that of Mr. Galton and others concerning the great variations among individuals in the type of their imagination. Every one is now familiar with the fact that human beings vary enormously in the brilliancy, completeness, definiteness, and extent of their visual images. … The facts, as I said, are nowadays so popularly known that I need only remind you of their existence. (*Talks, 790*)

Indeed, by the early 1890s, these “facts” were “so popularly known,” that James felt the need to warn teachers against over-reliance on their pupils’ introspective reports. “Depend upon it, no one need be too much cast down by the discovery of his deficiency in any elementary faculty of the mind,” he said. “You can be an artist without visual images, a reader without eyes, a mass of erudition with a bad elementary memory” (Ibid.).
Understanding the imagination to be subject to quirks of heredity meant that the imagination acquired fixed individual limits; presumably poor “visualists” had not been fully aware of their impoverishment until the statistical aggregation of mental imagery revealed the extent of their incapacity. And yet, by locating the imagination in the ingrained structures of the body, the imagination was made open to the kind of mental calisthenics that had historically been affiliated with memory. As we have seen, the very term “visualization” – “the power or process of forming a mental picture or vision of something not actually present to the sight; a picture thus formed” – was coined as part of this discourse; the first reference in the *Oxford Dewey likewise felt it important to console those without vivid imagery: “A person who is not a good visualist,” he explained, “need not therefore feel that he has no mind at all” (“Educational Lectures”). Indeed, as Dewey pointed out, conscious exercise could help. The teacher need only “give a little systematic practice in visualizing these figures, and so train the pupil to see these figures” (Ibid.). Such “practice” Dewey said, “would be of very great assistance in the intellectual work, because it would give the pupil the necessary data to work with” (Ibid.). William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Life’s Ideals*, based on 1892 lectures; 1899, in *Writings 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers, 705-887 (New York: The Library of America, 1992).

106 Galton’s early investigation of the imagination emerged out of his interest in inherited mental capacities. As he explained, “it seemed to me that the results might illustrate the essential differences between the mental operations of different persons, that they might give some clue to the origin of visions, and that the course of the inquiry might reveal some previously unnoticed facts” (*Inquiries*, 57). Those “unnoticed facts,” Galton hoped, would include “the relative development of various mental qualities in different races” (“Statistics,” 318). Though Galton speculated on the potential value of comparing the English with the French “curve” of visualization, his racial project was never completed satisfactorily – as one of his reviewers pointed out, his results seemed instead to make “unification and generalization in psychological matters even more difficult and hopeless than ever” (*Academy*, 31). Still, there were some tendencies that could be positively identified. Galton asserted that there were demonstrable mental traits for children, “savages” and women especially – all of whom reported greater vivacity of mental imagery than others. As Thomas Bouchard has written, “both the idea of a general factor of cognitive ability … and the idea that genetic factors might be an important source of variance in cognitive ability” were “first systematically expounded by Galton” (“I.Q.,” 126). Francis Galton, “Statistics of Mental Imagery,” *Mind* 5, no. 19 (July 1880); Francis Galton, *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 1883, 2nd ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1907); Grant Allen, review of *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*, *The Academy*, no. 584 (July 1883), 30-31; Thomas J. Bouchard, “I.Q. Similarity in Twins Reared Apart: Findings and Responses to Critics,” in *Intelligence, Heredity, and Environment*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Elena Grigorenko, 126-160 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997).

107 Twain was notoriously obsessed with mnemonics. As Thomas M. Walsh and Thomas D. Zlatic observe, “For most of his adult life… Samuel Clemens experimented with a variety of techniques to improve his memory” (“Art of Memory,” 226). In 1883, when he was writing *Huck Finn*, he invented the memory game. It was patented in 1885, under the name “Mark Twain’s Memory Builder”; when, in 1891, he put it on the market, it was a financial disaster. Thomas M. Walsh and Thomas D. Zlatic, “Mark Twain and the Art of Memory,” *American Literature* 53, no. 2 (May 1981): 214-31.
English Dictionary is a review of Galton’s early study of mental imagery.¹⁰⁸

Dewey preferred to use the term “realization,” as a way of including all manner of mental imagery – auditory, tactile, motor and gustatory, as well as visual – but in each case the process of imaginative “construction” was the same; and the process was the important factor in learning. Thus, as he explained in a 1901 lecture, the student “must learn how to handle these images, how to construct and reconstruct or make them over, in order to realize scenes which have never been actually presented to his senses, but only to his mind’s eye.”¹⁰⁹ It was this imaginative exercise – “constructing” and “reconstructing,” “handling” and “making over” mental images – that performed the important work of assimilating “alien material” into the self. Indeed, “even in abstract reasoning,” Dewey said, “a person must have an image.”¹¹⁰ “It is generally thought that reasoning has no connection at all with imagery” Dewey said. He continued,

I would suggest that what really goes on when we reason is that the mind starts with two truths different from each other, then, with what we call reason, these images are manipulated and finally made to run together and blend, so to speak, into another image. When, therefore, we find children having difficulty in understanding and explaining a thing on the logical side, ninety-nine times out of a hundred the best way to correct the fault is not to try to deal with the reasoning directly, but to go back to the images which are the basis of the reasoning. In the majority of cases, if these original images can be made definite and clear, it will be found that the reasoning process will then very largely take care of itself.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 14 of my introduction.
¹⁰⁹ Dewey, “Educational Lectures.”
¹¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹¹ Ibid. Indeed, mental imagery was of such crucial importance in understanding, that a student’s failure to “realize” a fact could in many cases be reduced to his or her inability to properly “realize” an image: “Very often it will be found to be due simply to lack of imaging power,” Dewey suggested. “If they could image the thing, they could reason about it” (Ibid.).
Pudd’nhead Wilson, I will suggest, presents the reader with an exercise of precisely this nature. As I will argue, the novel’s moral meaning is not to be found in its enlightened critique of race logic – a critique which is evident in the first pages of the novel – but rather, in its repeated deployment of the contradictory terms of that logic; terms that do not “run together and blend,” that do not resolve into “another image,” and which thus repeatedly bring the reader to a “realization” of this failure, rather than a mere cognizance of it. Indeed, in Pudd’nhead Twain coercively enlists the reader in a series of contradictory and shifting positions – shifts that seem calculatingly designed to be undergone in the reader’s own mind. In doing so, I will suggest, the reader can be re-trained – a training effected through the repeated exercise of imaginative disjunction.

As I have argued, the very possibility that literature could be a site of mental “work” is novel to this period. Indeed, for Dewey, the practice of “realization” had the power to materially reshape the mind. In Dewey’s account, a mental image was defined as “a psycho-physic activity involving brain excitation, and motor discharge, and (probably, in most cases) changes in sense-apparatus.” Like any “psycho-physic activity” then, the construction of an image left material traces on the brain’s surface. In this way, the practice of assembling (and disassembling) images could in fact alter the physical texture of the mind: new paths formed, “alien material” assimilated, new sympathies generated.

Indeed, as Dewey pointed out, in an 1894 lecture series, sympathy, if it were to be developed at all, was going to have to be trained:

Psychologically, the development of personal purity is question of training the

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imagination. Sympathy, if not sentimental, to be trained not directly, but through imagination. The controlling law is the relation of imagery to action, for … [a]n image is a habit of acting, bodily and conscious. The full concrete image becomes a deed.¹¹³

Thus, what Dewey described as the “moral significance of imagery” was linked to its location in the brain’s “excitations” – a “bodily and conscious” act that, like any other act, could take on the force of habit. As Dewey indicates, imaging was a thing one did – an act with both moral and cognitive consequences.¹¹⁴ By grounding the imagination in the inherited structures of the body, Galton’s study suggested the possibility that each of us was born with assessable cognitive limits, innate mental capacities that could not be entirely be changed; by the same token, however, imagination, now located in the body, could be understood as a habit, an action, a field of experience, registered in the resistant, yet malleable, tracks of the brain.

In Pudd’nhead Wilson, I will argue, Twain seeks to engender in the reader a sympathy such as Dewey describes here: one “not sentimental,” but rather “trained … through imagination.” In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889), Twain used the term “realization” to describe a process of understanding that seems to exceed mere knowledge of a fact – knowledge expressed in “words” alone. As Hank says, “it was only just words, words – they meant nothing in the world to him, I might just as well have whistled. Words realize nothing, vivify nothing to you, unless you have suffered in your own person the thing which the words try to describe.”¹¹⁵ And earlier in the novel: “The mere knowledge of a fact is pale;” he says; “but when you come to realize your fact, it takes on color. It is all the difference between

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Dewey, in a position shared by William James, worried that literature could at times engender “false” emotion; as he explained, in the same lecture series, “no one [is] right to have an emotion unless he has performed the corresponding activity” (Ibid.). In literary instruction, Dewey warned, there was thus a “danger of trying to deal with emotion directly, or immediately” (Ibid).

hearing of a man being stabbed to the heart, and seeing it done.” If, in *Connecticut Yankee*, Twain seems to feel the strain of what “words, words” can effect, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I will argue, represents an attempt to make the novel an *actual scene of “realization” itself* – an effort to have the reader not only “hear” about a “man being stabbed to the heart” but to make it matter of actually “seeing it done” – an act “suffered in your own person.”

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116 Ibid., 71.
II. Black Roxy/White Roxy: The Movement in Time

Critical readings of Roxy have generally fallen into two categories. The first, exemplified by Leslie Fiedler’s early appraisal of the novel, suggests that Roxana is the most fully developed character in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and the bearer of the novel’s darkest and most powerful insights. As Fiedler observes, Roxy is “a creature of passion and despair rare among the wooden images of virtue or bitchery that pass for females in American literature.” By this account, the divisions inherent in Roxana – in Carolyn Porter’s words, her “radical changes in demeanor, her white supremacist attitudes, and her capacity for both cruelty and tenderness” – are the marks of a fully-fledged character.

The second reading, exemplified by critics such as Arthur Pettit, working a full generation after Fiedler, suggests that Roxana’s seemingly complex shifts of character may be something closer to a radical bifurcation – the mark of a failure of characterization, rather than its success. “Dawson’s Landing had no difficulty deciding she was a mulatto,” Pettit writes. “But her creator did. Mark Twain in effect wound up with two Roxanas: a near-white one, carefully adjusted to the proper shade for white readers, and a much darker Roxana who may have figured

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118 Ibid. Carolyn Porter has appraised the problem in similar terms: “Many critics of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* have agreed on the extraordinary power of Roxana as a character, while others have attended more to her problematic behavior, such as the radical changes in her demeanor, her white supremacist attitudes, and her capacity for both cruelty and tenderness, and have offered a variety of explanations either to defend or to attack Twain’s portrayal” (“Roxana’s Plot,” 395).

more prominently in Mark Twain’s imagination.”

Thus, in Pettit’s final estimation, Roxy becomes a “two-toned portrait,” a “baffling black-and-white collage.” “The one thing wrong with Roxana is that she is neither black nor white long enough at a stretch to be entirely convincing,” he writes. 

The problem with this woman is not that she lacks qualities of character but that she has too many of them. Wandering back and forth between comedy and tragedy, between all-white Southern belle and all-black mammy, Roxana is the victim of Mark Twain’s own color confusion. … Alternately bleached and blackened too often and too haphazardly, Roxana ultimately fails to transcend the sentimentality she evokes and loses much of her identity and, therefore, much of her credibility.

In this reading, Roxana’s apparent internal division becomes symptomatic of Twain’s own relationship to race. In this respect, the character of Roxana still provides the important moral insight of the novel, but only in spite of Twain; whereas for Fiedler, the contradictions embodied in Roxana betray the problem of a cultural or national imagination, for Pettit, they betray a problem of Twain’s imagination.

And yet, I will argue, in a novel critically concerned with failures of imagination – staging them, producing them, and finally, correcting them – the divisions apparent in Roxana’s character drive the novel’s most important “effect.” Pettit uses the language of color metaphorically here, but, as I have suggested, Twain intends Roxana to be far more literally “bleached and blackened” than Pettit suggests – a transition that happens repeatedly in the novel. By understanding these transitions as a process of realization rather than as a process of characterization, I will argue, the novel acquires an entirely alternate moral register. Indeed,

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120 Pettit, “Black and White Curse,” 327.
121 Ibid., 322.
122 Ibid., 330.
123 Ibid.
though almost every critical account of Roxana in some way includes an acknowledgement that she is a character who is “internally split,” it is hardly noted that Twain quite carefully choreographs this division – a division staged in the field of the reader’s own mind.\textsuperscript{124} As we shall see, to understand this “two-toned portrait” as a \textit{product of the reader’s imagination} crucially reorients the meaning not only of Roxy’s division, but also of the novel’s ending.

The illustration history of the novel rather strikingly bears out a sense of Roxy’s visual instability. In the popular 1899 Harper & Brothers edition of the novel, an illustration titled “Roxy Harvesting Among the Kitchens” appeared as a frontispiece. (\textit{Figure 12}.)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{roxy_harvesting.png}
\caption{“Roxy Harvesting Among the Kitchens,” from \textit{Pudd’nhead Wilson} (Harper & Brothers, 1899).}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{124} Rogin, “Francis Galton,” 84.
\end{footnotesize}
The illustration, by E.W. Kemble, Twain’s favored illustrator for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, depicted a number of stock “types” – black “characters” that would be familiar to many of Twain’s readers. (In fact, we may recognize Mammy, Topsy and Uncle Tom here.)\(^{125}\) *(Figure 13.)* Though the illustration retained its place in the mass edition, over the next 40 years, the drawing was roundly criticized by a number of Twain’s later readers. Indeed, in his influential 1955 essay on the novel, Leslie Fiedler addressed the image directly. In the character of Roxy, Fiedler suggested, Twain had presented “a portrait so complex and unforeseen, that the baffled illustrator for the authorized standard edition chose to ignore it completely, drawing in the place of a ‘majestic ... rosy ... comely’ Roxana – a gross and comic Aunt Jemima” \(^{126}\)*

Martha Banta, writing in 1987, made the same critique: “Kemble,” Banta wrote, “did not draw the Roxy Mark Twain portrays. He set down the accepted fictions, ‘the orthodox opinions,’ governing turn-of-the-century identification with inferior racial types.”\(^{127}\)

\(^{125}\) In 1891, Kemble also illustrated an edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. His depiction of Uncle Tom *(figure 13)* bears striking resemblance to the man who appears at the door in “Roxy Harvesting Among the Kitchens” *(figure 12)*.

\(^{126}\) Fiedler, “As Free,” 249.

As Werner Sollors has discovered, however, both Fiedler and Banta were mistaken in their assessment of Kemble’s work. In an illustration that was later cut from the edition, Kemble draws Roxy just as Twain describes her: “very fair… with a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown … bound about with a checkered handkerchief.” 128 (Figure 14.)

Figure 14. “Roxy Among the Field Hands,” from Pudd’nhead Wilson (Harper & Brothers, 1899).

Kemble, it seems did depict Roxy in accordance with Twain’s description. 129 On second look, the frontispiece illustration – “Roxy Harvesting at the Kitchens” – also includes Roxy, lurking in the

128 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 13.

background, only her head and “checkered handkerchief” visible behind the three other figures. (Figure 12.)

It is of course hard to know how many of Twain’s readers mistook the central figure for a depiction of Roxy – and more important, how many objected to the depiction. Given Fiedler’s and Banta’s responses, it seems likely that at least a few of the novel’s readers understood the central “Mammy” figure to be a depiction of Roxy – even in explicit contradiction to the text’s instruction. Indeed, though Fiedler and Banta objected, others did not; the frontispiece, with its misleading label, was picked up by a number of publishers, through many printings over the next three decades.

Nevertheless, Fiedler’s and Banta’s misrecognition of Roxy here – their elision of the actual Roxy figure in the background – acknowledges the idea that Roxy’s white appearance could in some way be “forgotten” over the course of the novel.130 Indeed, the very idea that this was even a plausible kind of mistake for an illustrator to make suggests the particular force with which Twain conjures a Roxy who, in explicit contradiction to the text’s instruction, at least at times, appears “black.”131 As I will argue, if the “forgetfulness” that Fiedler and Banta ascribe to Kemble is to be understood as likely in any way, we must understand this as an “error” that Twain himself prompts. Twain was well-known for the concrete and well-defined visual

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130 Arthur Pettit’s critique of the novel registers this concern: “In the course of the story,” he writes, Roxana’s “whiteness is the one thing about her we tend to ignore or forget: her speech and manners, strength and endurance, shrewdness and passion are qualities that Mark Twain usually reserved for black women” (“Black and White Curse,” 329). Pettit here refers to a matter of racial characterization. To be clear, I am making a literal argument about skin color.

131 Sollors suggests the possibility that Kemble is being extraordinarily sly here: “Did Kemble want to please the viewers who were looking for one of his trademark mammys as well as the readers of the novel who wanted to find the true Roxy? Could Kemble have hidden his Roxy consciously in honor of Mark Twain's sentence, ‘From Roxy’s manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not’? Could Kemble’s drawing be a perfect rendition of the irony of the situation which condemns Roxy to be ‘seen’ as black and a slave by the society in which she lives, notwithstanding the fact that her appearance is that of a white woman...?” (“Was Roxy Black?”, 82).
depiction of his characters, so much so that illustrations of Twain amongst his characters – all instantly recognizable – could be circulated with no accompanying text. (*Figures 15 and 16.*) That is to say, if Roxana’s appearance is in some way confusable, this confusion is one that Twain quite deliberately choreographs.

*Figure 15. “Mark Twain” (1907).*

*Figure 16. “A Surprise Party for Mark Twain and His Characters,” (1915 advertisement).*
Indeed, many of the novel’s otherwise curious elisions seem specifically calculated to encourage the reader to “forget” Roxy’s white appearance – and thus to repeat the error the reader made at Wilson’s window. As many readers have noted, Roxana is a stock “type” familiar from fiction – that of the “Tragic Mulatta.” And yet, though the “Mulatta” plot immediately suggests that Roxy will at some point “pass” as white, this expectation goes unfulfilled in the novel. Indeed, in a novel notoriously packed with plot twists, Roxy’s white appearance never figures as a part of the action of the novel (even when she does disguise herself, she dresses as a man). More tellingly, perhaps, though Roxy is described as a “mulatto” in early drafts of the novel – a label that would remind readers that she is not an “all-black mammy” – Twain removed these descriptors; in the final text, Roxy is only ever referenced by name or by pronoun only, thus leaving the reader to “fill in” Roxy’s appearance from barely submerged linguistic cues: either the narrator’s allusive asides (as in the mention of a “lurid ribbon”) or, more often, from an encounter with Roxy’s language alone.

By progressively “blanking” out Roxy in this way, Roxy’s dialect becomes the primary signifier of her appearance. The quality of Roxy’s speech has been a subject of discussion since the novel was first published. Indeed, at least one 1895 reader felt that Roxy’s talk alone was sufficient to produce a fully fledged picture of her character: “How deliciously rich, racy, and copious is, for instance, [Twain’s] negro talk,” the reviewer wrote. “The very gurgling laugh and

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132 Though, as Caroline Porter has observed, the overall plot of the novel is in some way motivated by the fact that it is possible to be the black mother of a “white” son, the narrative itself never deploys this detail (“Roxana’s Plot,” 398). Notably, though we are continually reminded that Roxy is Tom’s mother, even this does not serve as a “reminder” of Roxy’s white appearance; she insists that Tom call her “mammy.”

133 Arlin Turner was the first to observe this: “in the early draft Roxana is normally referred to as a mulatto, a crone, or an old woman,” whereas “in the revisions such designations are replaced by her name or a simple pronoun” (“Mark Twain and the South,” 290). Turner understands this revision to be one that underscores Roxy’s “dignity.” For Turner, the edit reflects Twain’s own development as a thinker on race – “the expansion that was taking place in the author’s understanding of Negro character and Negro experiences in America” (“Mark Twain and the South,” 289).
cooing cadence seem, somehow, implied in the text; and the fancy instinctively adds the vivid miens and gestures.”\(^{134}\) It remains of course questionable what “vivid miens and gestures” the reviewer’s “fancy” added “instinctively,” but Twain’s later readers have critiqued him for the depiction. As Paul Cox has written, “although Roxy’s vernacular allows her an element of poetic and passionate range, it is nonetheless a stereotype of the language of slavery, and Mark Twain as arbitrarily blackens her with it as the slaveholders have arbitrarily made her invisible one-sixteenth of black blood outvote the fifteen parts of white blood.…”\(^{135}\)

Twain thus continually reinserts the reader into the position dramatized in the opening scene – left to encounter Roxy through her words alone. And, as in the first scene, if Roxy is “blackened” by a “stereotype of the language of slavery,” I would suggest that this “blackness” is not in any way “arbitrary.” Twain straightforwardly expresses this intention in the first pages of the novel: “from Roxy’s manner of speech,” he says, “a stranger would have expected her to be black.”\(^{136}\) Twain here suggests that the reader will come to the novel with a prior association between “black” speech and black skin – between the dialect of minstrelsy and its literally black-faced stereotypes. Notably, however, Twain does not merely hope for the reader’s association between the “color” of Roxy’s speech and the color of her skin, but rather reinforces it. Indeed, even in the first “overheard” conversation between Roxy and Jasper, Twain freights the dialect with references to visual color: Roxy calls Jasper a “black mud cat,” and refers to “niggers as black as yo’ is,” references presumably intended to encourage an (incorrect) visualization of the


\(^{136}\) Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 13.
Twain “colors” Roxy’s speech in other ways as well. Indeed, with one notable exception at the end of the novel, in every scene in which Roxy speaks at all, she at some point uses the term “nigger.” The use of this word is so insistent — and so insistently embedded in Roxy’s own speech — that it comes to be affiliated both with Roxy and with the dialect as such. As she herself puts it, “I’s a nigger, en nobody ain’t gwyne to doubt it dat hears me talk.” Though “nigger” is not an explicit color term, the word is used continually as the opposite of “white” — as in Tom’s question, “‘Why were niggers and whites made?’” Indeed, if there is any doubt that the word begins to function as a visual signifier in this text, the illustrations to the first American edition of the novel provide evidence of at least one reader’s interpretation. Here the “little sickly nigger wench” that Roxy meets is rendered as a featureless black silhouette; Roxy’s “ole nigger preacher” as a crude black caricature. (Figures 17 and 18.)

**Figure 17.** “Dey was a little sickly nigger wench ’bout ten year ole…” (1894, first American edition).

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137 Ibid.

138 Roxy’s last speech, in the courtroom, is the only exception to this rule. “De Lor have mercy on me, po’ misable sinner dat I is!” Roxy says (Pudd’nhead, Modern, 176). Here “sinner” replaces the term “nigger”; the phrase appeared earlier in the novel, when Roxy falsely confessed to stealing: “‘I done it! – have mercy, marster – Lord have mercy on us po’ niggers!’” (Pudd’nhead, Modern, 18).

139 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 126.

140 Ibid., 69.

141 Ibid., 136; 22.
Twain thus seems to continually prompt a kind of “error” on the reader’s part; by “blackening” Roxy so insistently with her language, it becomes possible to imagine, as Fiedler and Banta did, that some readers may simply “forget” that Roxy looks white. The “black” Roxy of the opening scene – the Roxy overheard through Wilson’s window – becomes a kind of ghost presence in the text, continually evoked by the novel, but never explicitly recognized.

And yet, though Twain certainly does encourage a kind of “forgetfulness” about Roxy’s white appearance, that “forgetting” can never be permanent. Rather, as in the first scene staged at Wilson’s window, Twain, throughout the novel, insists upon a sequence of correction. Indeed, though Roxy’s white appearance does not figure in any of the plot’s twists, and is suppressed for long periods of Roxy’s speech, Twain intermittently (and even coercively) brings the reader into a recognition of her fair complexion – not on the level of plot, but on the level of sense.

An example will help here. As I have argued, the structure of the opening sequence is repeated in condensed forms throughout the novel. Indeed, only a few lines after we have viewed Roxy through Wilson’s window, Twain repeats the same technique, modeled by the first encounter. Wilson tells Roxy that the two boys in her wagon are “‘handsome little chaps. One’s
just as handsome as the other, too.’”

A delighted smile exposed the girl’s white teeth, and she said:

‘Bless yo’ soul, Misto Wilson, it’s pow’ful nice o’ you to say dat, ’ca’se one of ’em ain’t on’y a nigger. Mighty prime little nigger, I al’ays says, but dat’s ’ca’se it’s mine, o’ course.’

‘How do you tell them apart, Roxy, when they haven’t any clothes on?’

Twain’s reference to Roxy’s “white teeth” draws upon the literary trope of remarking upon the teeth of slaves, rhetorically contrasted to a dark complexion – as we may recall from Stowe’s description of Topsy:

She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment at the wonders of the new Mas’r’s parlor, displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth.

For Stowe, Topsy’s “white and brilliant set of teeth” serve to underscore the fact that she “was one of the blackest of her race.” Twain’s reference to Roxy’s “white teeth,” then, seems calculated to evoke not only a minstrel stereotype, but its visual terms, drawn from a literary tradition that, we have seen, operates in a rhetorically visual mode. With this reference,
directly followed by Roxy’s broad dialect, her language laden twice with the crude term
“nigger,” Twain seems to challenge the reader to recall that Roxy herself looks white – a fact that
he took pains to emphasize only a few lines before, with his description of Roxy’s “rosy glow.”

And yet, though Twain clearly encourages this error, it will immediately be corrected. Indeed, though Twain strongly miscues the reader here, the reader must recall Roxy’s white appearance in order for the passage to make any sense at all. Roxy makes a rhetorically nonsensical assertion that though the two boys look precisely the same, one is black and one is white – rhetorically nonsensical, that is, in any context but slavery. The only way to understand this seemingly paradoxical assertion is to recall that “one of ’em” is Roxy’s – and that Roxy herself is fair. Thus, as in the opening scene, the spatial comparison in this passage – between a black baby and a white baby, set facing one another in a wagon – is paired with a transition in Roxy’s appearance, one that occurs in narrative time. And, as in the opening tableau, Twain draws the reader into an error only to perform a kind of mental “correction” – an imaginative self-discipline that negotiates between black and white.

The sense here, and throughout the novel, that we are party to an error produces a kind of hallucinatory effect. For Martha Banta, Kemble’s supposed misperception of Roxy revealed a fact about Kemble’s psychology – showing it to be historically and culturally bound. But psychology, I would suggest, is precisely the point here. Indeed, if, as I have argued, the text repeatedly codes this as a misperception, that misperception likewise registers as a mark of a psychology, in this case our own. By making Roxy’s skin color into the field of a repeated mistake, this “black” Roxy becomes a product of our own mind rather than a product of the text itself.
That is to say, if we momentarily mistook Roxy’s “manner of speech” to be a marker of her visual appearance; if we took the phrase “white teeth” to indicate something other than the quality of Roxy’s smile; if we misunderstood, if we misperceived, if we misread, we were just imagining things. Listening at Wilson’s window, the reader “sees” a Roxy with dark skin and is corrected; the error carries with it Twain’s sly implied question: What were you thinking? If we had “expectations” about Roxy’s race at this moment or any other – expectations drawn from fiction, from minstrelsy, from cliché and convention, from a “collection of cant phrases, and the whole genus of penny-a-line-isms” – we were in error.

To argue that the black stereotypes produced by the text – Roxy as “all-black mammy” – emerge as a production of the reader’s own mind is not to suggest the easy dismissal of racial thinking. Just to the contrary: race is shown to be “imaginary” here not in the sense that it is “made up” or “unreal,” but rather to be “constructed” in Dewey’s sense of the term – written into the mind as a pathway, a track, an ingrained habit of thought.

As many readers have noted, the illustrations to the first American edition of Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894) also included a number of inconsistencies – images that contradicted or otherwise undermined Twain’s stated descriptions of the scenes pictured. As Beverley David and Ray Sapirstein observe, in these illustrations, the appearance of both Roxy and Tom is inconstant, and seems to change as the text wears on. Though the illustrators “depicted Roxy and Tom as ‘white’ to satisfy the text early on,” they note, “by the end of the story they felt it necessary to reinforce the one-drop blood stigma of Dawson’s Landing society.”

Thus, in the final illustrations of the novel, “Roxy becomes a personality with distinct features for the first time,” but the illustrator

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here “emphasizes her tinge of ‘black blood,’ shading her neck and the side of her face.”

(Figures 19 and 20.) Tom’s depiction changes more radically; at the moment when Wilson reveals Tom to be a slave; the illustrators render him black: “Tom is depicted pushing a wheelbarrow, his skin inked in the same manner used for all the African-American characters,” David and Sapirstein write, “his ‘blackness’ magnified in an extreme miscarriage of the message of Twain’s text.” (Figure 21.)

Figure 19. Roxy and Tom in the duel scene (1894, first American edition).

Figure 20. Roxy in the trial scene of the novel (1894, first American edition).

148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
More strikingly perhaps, the illustrations, which closely follow the plot on every page, also include a number of images entirely unconnected from the story itself. (Figure 2.) These deeply racist images are in no way referenced or cited in the novel; rather, they seem to appear as what Twain might term an “unconscious cerebration,” in some way called to the mind by the text’s continued and relentless evocation of black stereotypes. In a novel in which all of the primary (and nearly all of the minor) characters we are told, look white, caricatures of “blackness” nevertheless come to populate the margin – the illustrator’s idea, at least, of what “black” might mean. (Figure 23.)

Though both the Norton Critical edition and Modern Library edition of the novel include a selection of these illustrations, it is not perhaps surprising that many of these images were not chosen for publication. ¹⁵⁰ As David and Sapirstein write, at best, these images provide “twentieth-century readers with a vivid sampler of the prevalent racial stereotypes that his book –

¹⁵⁰ The inclusion of illustrations, I would argue, deeply blunts the moral force of Twain’s text. Indeed, in my reading of the text, the reader’s sense of his or her own active participation in the task of visualization is a constituent part of the work of the novel. That so many current readers of the novel encounter the text with illustration means that the novel comes to seem more farce than tragedy. As I will argue, there is no tragedy in Pudd’nhead Wilson outside of the tragedy we make ourselves.
with mixed success – sought to challenge.”¹⁵¹ And yet, I will argue, these illustrations are not a “miscarriage” of the meaning of Twain’s text, but rather a striking fulfillment of its terms. Indeed, to suggest that the racial thinking of the text is part of a past imaginary is to misunderstand the work of the novel. If Pudd’nhead Wilson has only “mixed success” in dispelling racial stereotypes, this is because these stereotypes – and the binary race logic that underwrites them – are not meant to be dispelled, but rather shown to be summoned by the reader him or herself – one’s own imagination shown to be as shaped and divided by race as that of Tom, Chambers or Roxy. A “lurid ribbon,” after all, could just be lurid; “white teeth” could just be white. Any other associations are merely a product of our own “fancy.”

When Aunt Patsy takes the stand in Those Extraordinary Twins, a lawyer questions her knowledge: “‘How do you know?’” he asks. “‘That is the question. Please answer it plainly and squarely.’”¹⁵² Patsy replies:

‘Don’t you talk to me like that, Sim Robinson –
I won’t have it. How do I know, indeed! How do you know what you know? Because someone told you. You didn’t invent it out of your own head, did you?’¹⁵³

Pudd’nhead Wilson, I would suggest, continually asks us this question; and our answer is continually Patsy’s. We “know” about white teeth and lurid ribbons, about a dialect that is “the language of slavery” because “someone told” us – Stowe, blackface minstrelsy, sentimental fiction, American culture at large; we did not “invent it” out of our own heads. And yet, over and over again, Twain demonstrates that though we did not “invent it,” it nevertheless resides in our own heads – and has now become an “invention” of our own.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 27.
¹⁵² Twain, Those Extraordinary Twins, Modern, 227.
¹⁵³ Ibid.
III. Wrong Directions Instead of Right Ones

After careful study of many fingerprints, Galton was forced to acknowledge that these “most trustworthy sign manuals” did not, in fact, bare the traces of racial identity.\(^{154}\) But he nevertheless allowed himself one speculation: “whether it be from pure fancy on my part, or from the way in which they were printed, or from some real peculiarity, the general aspect of the Negro print strikes me as characteristic.”\(^{155}\) As Galton’s comment suggests, if “a complex pattern … may suggest a variety of forms and faces to those who have such fancies” – one of those “fancies” may be the perception of race itself.

Though Twain has been critiqued for his use of Galton, it should be noted that, in *Finger Prints*, the problem of race and the problem of reading are crucially linked. “The same familiar patterns recur in every large collection of finger prints, and the eye soon selects what appear to be typical forms” Galton observed. “But are they truly ‘typical’ or not?” he asked.\(^{156}\) *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I have argued, continually foregrounds this uncertainty.

It is worth now returning to the opening scene. As the narrative begins, Wilson, we are told, practices a “fad without a name” – one that “dealt with people’s finger marks.”\(^{157}\) Wilson here takes the role of Galton, applying labels to prints:\(^ {158}\)

He carried in his coat pocket a shallow box with grooves in it, and in the grooves strips of glass five inches long and three inches wide. Along the lower edge of each strip was pasted a slip of white paper. He asked people to pass their hands through their hair (thus

155 Ibid., 196.
156 Ibid., 198.
157 Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 12.
158 Wilson’s use of a “pantograph” as the means for fingerprint enlargement was drawn from Galton’s text (*Finger Prints*, 52). The use of oil from the hair was also recommended in *Finger Prints* (Ibid., 30).
collecting upon them a thin coating of the natural oil) and then making a thumb-mark on a glass strip, following it with the mark of the ball of each finger in succession. Under this row of faint grease prints he would write a record on the strip of white paper – thus:

**JOHN SMITH, right hand –**

and add the day of the month and the year, then take Smith’s left hand on another glass strip, and add name and date and the words ‘left hand.’ The strips were now returned to the grooved box, and took their place among what Wilson called his ‘records.’ He often studied his records, examining and poring over them with absorbing interest until far into the night; but what he found there – if he found anything – he revealed to no one. Sometimes he copied on paper the involved and delicate pattern left by the ball of the finger, and then vastly enlarged it with a pantograph so that he could examine its web of curving lines with ease and convenience.

One sweltering afternoon – it was the first day of July, 1830 – he was at work over a set of tangled account-books in his work-room, which looked westward over a stretch of vacant lots, when a conversation outside disturbed him. It was carried on in yells, which showed that the people were not close together:

‘Say, Roxy, how does yo’ baby come on?’ This from the distant voice.

‘Fust-rate. How does you come on, Jasper?’ This yell was from close by.\(^\text{159}\)

Wilson may be at work applying labels, but Twain makes clear that this is the reader’s task as well. Indeed, Twain here directly likens the act of interpreting fingerprints to the reader’s present act of reading. Wilson studies his “records,” “examining and poring over them far into the night,” a “web of curving lines” that is directly parallel to the “set of tangled account books” over which he labors in the next sentence.\(^\text{160}\) The typography in this passage reinforces the link between Wilson’s fingerprint “records” and the literal “record” that we ourselves are in the

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 12-13.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 12.
process of interpreting. The “JOHN SMITH” label functions as a kind of illustration; here the reader, like Wilson, is presented with a “strip of white paper” below a “row of faint grease prints” – a description that could easily be extended to the page above – itself series of “grease prints, a “web of curving lines.”

As we have seen however, Twain immediately leads the reader into an imaginative “error” here – one produced by a process of false “labeling.” Twain makes clear that Wilson is not surprised by Roxy’s appearance when he arrives at the window: Wilson, he tells us, “knew Roxy by sight.” If there is a mistake about Roxy, then, it is only the reader’s own. If, as William James wrote, “half” of reading is not present on the “printed page,” Twain here foregrounds that half – the “half” that comes “out of the mind” itself; by the same token, if we find “typical forms” in this text, it has been a “type” produced by our own mind.

“A little violence has of course to be used now and then, in fitting some unusual patterns to some one or other of these few symbols,” Galton writes – and Twain, I would argue, coercively inserts the reader into a position collusive with precisely this “violence.” As many of Twain’s later critics have noted, there are only two races in Pudd’nhead Wilson: black and white; the novel brooks no in between. In this respect, Pudd’nhead rigorously reproduces what Susan Gillman describes as the “American two category system.” Though the novel’s thoroughgoing adherence to this system has been understood at times as an implicit critique of the historical race thinking that it embodies, it has nevertheless presented one of the novel’s most troubling aspects. In a novel that is premised upon an act of racial miscegenation, but which conceptually allows no mixing at all, Roxana is nearly torn apart. As Michael Rogin has remarked, “no one in Pudd’nhead Wilson can imagine the opposition between a system of binary

\[161 \text{ Ibid., 14.}\]

\[162 \text{ Gillman, “Sure Identifiers,” 91.}\]
racial classification and its absence, much less stand for the latter.”

Thus, as Rogin observes, the system “divides Roxana herself,” who is both “bifurcated” and “internally split” in the division between black and white.

And yet, if “no one in Pudd’nhead Wilson can imagine” the end of the “two category system,” I would argue, this is because Twain does not allow it. Though many critics refer to Roxana and Tom as “mulattoes,” the novel itself never admits this term; Twain removed the word from earlier drafts. Indeed, Twain avoids not only the terminology, but also the visual conventions for the depiction of mulatto figures: the single “drop” of “black” blood that was traditionally made subtly manifest in the character’s skin, hair or fingernails.

Roxy’s description of Tom’s “pure” white appearance includes both an acknowledgement of this convention – and of Twain’s pointed rejection of it: “‘Ain’t nigger enough in him to show in his fingernails, en dat takes mighty little – yit dey’s enough to paint his soul.’” In this respect, I would suggest, though Roxana occupies the position of the “Tragic Mulatta,” she is not of “mixed” race; indeed, Twain’s concerted refusal of both the linguistic and visual terms of the mulatto trope suggest that Roxy is not in fact intended to be “mixed” at all. Rather, she is two races – white and black – never both at the same time.

Indeed, I would suggest, the stark racial binary of the novel is used to ensure that Roxy

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163 Rogin, “Francis Galton,” 84.
164 Ibid. As many readers have noted, the very existence of children of mixed-race presented a challenge to a paradigm of race that associated blackness with a singular imagined racial “type.” “Mulattoes,” Gillman writes, “blurred the clear separation between the races essential to American race slavery, and miscegenation was thus perceived as a threat to a biracial society” (“Sure Identifiers,” 91). The idea that “the offspring of miscegenation would be an unnatural type” was part of the discourse of heredity – one that Galton himself helped establish (“Sure Identifiers,” 92). As Shawn Michelle Smith has written, “in Galton’s eyes, a biracial individual constituted a degenerate blot on both parent groups, a biological anomaly that must die out” (Photography on the Color Line, 52). Indeed, as Mary Ann Doane has observed, a person “whose looks and ontology do no coincide” poses a threat “to the very idea of racial categorization” (qtd. in Smith, Photography, 52). Shawn Michelle Smith, Photography on the Color Line (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

165 Werner Sollors, Neither Black Nor White Yet Both (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 144.
does not “resolve” – not only as a character, but more specifically, *as an idea*. If “black” and “white” are fully incompatible terms in this novel, it is not only because black and white are perceptual, cultural and symbolic opposites, but because Twain *writes these terms into the structure of reading itself*. That is to say, the reader’s inability to “imagine” a world in which black and white are not strict binaries is not merely a matter of troping or terminology, but is built into the very task of reading *as such*: the task dramatized in the very first scene of the novel, the task of moving from a “blind” conversation to the view at Wilson’s window, the task of making images out of a field of words.

Take, for example, a sentence we have already seen: “‘I’s a nigger, en nobody ain’t gwyne to doubt it dat hears me talk.’”¹⁶⁶ Roxy’s complex statement of identity produces the familiar conflict between two definitions of color – one a social construction, one a visual description of literal appearance: Roxy states that she is legally black, and saleable as such; she also, in the same sentence, states that her visual appearance is not black at all – otherwise, there would be nothing to “doubt.” The resolution of these two conflicting definitions occurs over the course of the sentence, as the reader parses this otherwise paradoxical statement.

As we have seen, however, throughout the novel Twain pairs the *understanding* that race is a “fiction” with a first-hand *experience* of this insight. Indeed, the resolution of this statement is not merely a matter of comprehension – rather, it is *theatricalized* in the reader’s encounter with the statement itself. Roxy’s statement is circularly self-certifying: she says *that* her speech renders her saleable as a slave, an idea that is evidenced by the *form* of the statement itself – its broad “slave” dialect. Roxy’s statement of self-identification thus ties her identity to the quality of her own speech, just as Aunt Patsy and Rowena might if they were reading her letter (or this

¹⁶⁶ Twain, *Pudd’nhead*, Modern, 126.
novel). In parsing the statement “‘I’s a nigger, en nobody ain’t gwyne to doubt it dat hears me talk’” the reader must, at least momentarily, sign on with this truth.

And yet, though Roxy describes her language as a certain indicator that she is black, and though the form of her language affirms that assertion, in order to process the meaning of the sentence, the reader must recall that Roxy appears not black, but white. The effect is once again a feeling of dissonance – an irresolution here registered not on the level of plot or narrative, but experienced in the momentary act of “sense-making.”

And in this tiny action, the reader, in the inflexible position as a reader, must, at least for an instant, participate in a system that, in the novel, is the system of racism – one in which a “style” of language becomes an indelible marker of race. At the end of *Pudd’nhead*, Tom is sold down the river, subject to the physiognomic fantasy dreamt of by Galton in *Finger Prints*; Chambers is subject to a different fate:

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his laugh – all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. … The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man’s parlor, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the ‘nigger gallery’ – that was closed to him for good and all. But we cannot follow his curious fate further – that would be a long story.167

Chambers has no place in the town – neither the “family pew,” nor the “‘nigger gallery.’” Though Chambers is freed from slavery, Chambers’s divided racial identity is permanently illegible to a society that thinks only in terms of black or white. In the terms of the novel’s logic – a logic in which “negro” language marks “negro” race – the legal change in Chambers’s status

167 Ibid., 179.
cannot restore his “white” identity. Rather, Twain’s radical conclusion here is that Chambers – like Roxy, burdened with the “bassest dialect” – is *neither* white nor black, but in fact, *two* separate races.

Chambers’ exclusion here is double: indeed, if Dawson’s Landing has no place for a character such as Chambers, neither does the *narrative*. “We cannot follow his curious fate further,” Twain writes. “That would be a long story.” Thus, as with Tom, here too the novel itself seems to collude with and even empower Galton’s dream of physiognomy – the force, that is, of racism. And yet, as the entire novel has repeatedly demonstrated for us, if the people of Dawson’s Landing have a difficult time “resolving” the character of an individual who is both white and black, we too are participants in that system. As a white man with black speech, Chambers is not only narratively unavailable, but rather, *literally unrealizable*. The town’s inability to “think” Chambers, the novel’s inability to narrate him, has been matched throughout the novel by our, persistent, repeated, inability to literally “realize” Roxy. If the fact that Chambers cannot be imagined *constitutes* his awful fate, we have condemned Roxy to the same end.

Thus, though we may believe ourselves to be “strangers” to the town at the beginning of the novel, by the book’s conclusion, we can no longer entertain such an illusion. Indeed, if we disapprove of the ending of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, in *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Twain immediately reminds us that we have been directly party to the town’s logic, to Wilson’s logic, to the logic of fingerprinting and physiognomy – that is to say, to Galton’s logic – throughout. *Pudd’nhead* ends with the dismissal of “two negro men”; *Those Extraordinary Twins* begins with a scene in which “two negro men” arrive, like a haunting.

It is a scene we have already encountered before, a reprise of Patsy and Rowena’s reading
of the twins’ letter. In *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Patsy and Rowena’s reading is further extended, and so too the time which the reader must wait for a visual description of the twins. Twain walks the reader line-by-line through the letter as it is read aloud, annotated by Patsy and Rowena’s interpretation:

‘It starts off so: “HONORED MADAM” — ‘
‘I like that, ma, don’t you? It shows they’re high-bred.’
‘Yes, I noticed that when I first read it. “My brother and I have seen your advertisement, by chance, in a copy of your local journal—“
‘It’s so beautiful and smooth, ma – don’t you think so?’

As Rowena comments, “I do hope they are handsome, and I just know they are! Don’t you hope they are, ma?” “The time does drag along so, and I’m so dying to see them! Which of them do you reckon is the tallest, ma?” “Well then, which do you reckon is the best looking?” “I think Angelo is; it’s the prettiest name, anyway. Don’t you think it’s a sweet name, ma?”

At last there was knock at the door and the anxious family jumped to open it. Two negro men entered, each carrying a trunk, and proceeded up-stairs toward the guest room. Then followed a stupefying apparition – a double-headed human creature with four arms, one body, and a single pair of legs!

Upon encountering the scene a second time, the reader by now knows what to expect. Here again, the “two negro men” appear – but in place of the handsome, tall Italian twins, a “stupefying apparition” arrives at the door – a “double-headed human creature.” This “creature” represents a surprise for Patsy and Rowena – a comeuppance for their naïve belief in a version of literary “physiognomy.” As knowing readers, we distance ourselves from Patsy and Rowena’s style of reading – we have, after all, heard this joke before. But the scene represents our own

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168 Twain, *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Modern, 189.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., 190.
comeuppance as well.

As I have argued, this scene precisely repeats the structure of the opening of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*; indeed, the placement of these scenes at the heads of both novels confirms their parallelism. The repetition, however, is deeply unsettling. In *Those Extraordinary Twins*, a scene of reading, an extended wait, and a racial joke precede the appearance of a “double-headed human creature,” a “stupefying apparition.” In *Pudd’nhead*, the only “double-headed” “apparition” that appears after a scene of reading, an extended wait, and a racial joke is an “apparition” that we ourselves have produced: the divided Roxy of the “vacant lots.” Indeed, as I have argued, throughout *Pudd’nhead*, Twain has figured Roxy as precisely this: singular and yet never anything other than *double*, a figure divided between dark and light, an “apparition” produced as a result of a continual practice of “bad” reading, one that equates a style of language with a form of appearance. If there is a “stupefying apparition” in this novel it is a monster that we ourselves have produced.

As Susan Gillman has observed, the novel’s strict commitment to the binary system “mirrors problems in American race relations during both the antebellum period which the novel is set and the 1890s when it was written.”171 “In this sense,” Gillman argues, “Twain’s novel implicitly reminds readers that racial codes regulating miscegenation and classifying mixed-race offspring did not disappear after Emancipation….”172 And yet, in Reconstruction America, a “reminder” could hardly be enough. Indeed, Twain does far more than merely *highlight* the irrationality of “racial identity as a system of deceptive mathematics” here – rather, he makes the reader literally *realize* it.173 If the historical racial system of black and white is reproduced by the

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172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., 90.
novel, it is a system that the reader is enjoined to reproduce as well, in his or her own imaginative experience. Thus, while we may speak of the color line of 1830, 1890, or even the color line of the 21st century – in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Twain ensures that that color line is extended to your own head.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Miss Ophelia attempts to reform Topsy, but Stowe indicates that Ophelia’s work must begin with her own reform. Ophelia’s education begins with this admission: “‘I've always had a prejudice against negroes.’” she says. “‘And it’s a fact, I never could bear to have that child touch me; but, I don't think she knew it.’” In Stowe’s novel, both Topsy and Ophelia have been marred by the system of slavery; in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I would suggest, Twain extends this insight to the reader as well. Indeed, as the novel repeatedly demonstrates, we cannot remove ourselves from the system of racism at a distance sufficient to either judge it or to mourn it.

Leslie Fiedler’s essay on *Pudd’nhead* registers something of this effect: “No matter how enlightened our conscious and rational conviction may be in these matters,” he writes, “we are beset by a buried ambivalence based on this archetypal symbolism of light and dark.” Indeed, if “conscious and rational conviction” were the work of the novel, its work would be done in its first few pages. To congratulate ourselves on our “enlightenment” in matters of racism would require the possibility that we could conceivably opt out of the system of thinking that supports it. Our good intentions, like Miss Ophelia’s, will not be sufficient. *Pudd’nhead Wilson* does not ask us to introspectively assess if we are complicit in this system, as it does not in fact offer the opportunity to be outside of this system. We cannot assess the problem from the window.

It is not a light sentence. Even as I make this claim, I would like to acknowledge the

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175 Fiedler, “As Free,” 255.
intense discomfort of this argument. As I have written this chapter, I have become keenly aware of the perils of trying to unpack a text that stages its own “unconscious cerebrations” as your own – an unconscious that appears as a manifestation of racism. I have here had to use the essentialized and essentializing language of black and white; these are Twain’s terms and the novel’s, and in order to convey the effect I am describing, I am also subject to them. These terms work to make blackness a kind of “error” – a “disfiggeration” of the characters – a logic that the novel’s readers are made a party to, readers including myself. Thus even as I argue that the structure of the text announces Twain’s effort to produce this effect; even as I argue that he is precisely deploying the terms of a pictorial literary tradition in order to do this; even as I suggest that Twain forcibly coerces us into this a binary system of racism; even as I point to the fact that many (if not most) of the novel’s readers have in some way likewise registered their experience of this effect; even as I say all of this, in order to even imply this claim, I seem nevertheless to have to admit my own at least momentary complicity in this process. In order to acknowledge it exists at all means admitting that “white teeth” and “lurid ribbons” do signify for me; means admitting that Roxy’s exclamation – “you black mud cat! Yah – yah – yah!” – calls up for me an entire set of images drawn from American vaudeville, broadsides, sentimental fiction, and a horrifyingly rich store of racist visualizations that, as an American, more than a century after Twain’s writing, I can conjure with shocking ease.

As Philip Fisher has observed, it is the “powerlessness” expressed in sentimental fiction that makes us cry: “once an action is in the deep past and has left irreversible damage, even the consequences cannot be lessened,” he writes.¹⁷⁶ “The tears that are so important a part of sentimentally are best understood in this context. … Tears represent the fact that only a witness

who cannot effect action will experience suffering as deeply as the victim.” As many readers have noted, the ending of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* expresses a similar kind of “irreversible damage.” Both Chambers and Tom are brought back into their proper place in the town, but the rectification of the boys’ identities cannot fully “right” Roxana’s swap; as one early reviewer observed, “as the mistake lasts for twenty-three hard years, in spite of Pudd’nhead Wilson's cleverness, the end is prevented from being a very cheerful one.” More than this, however, the novel offers the reader no appealing alternative to this ending; indeed, if Roxy had never switched the children, Tom would be consigned to slavery, as he is at the end of the novel; Chambers would merely have become a white master. As Myra Jehlen has observed, the novel’s ending is stuck in “a stalemate between radical criticism and an implicit conservatism expressed in the refusal or the inability, when it comes to it, to imagine significant change.”

Jehlen attributes this “stalemate” to Twain’s own inability to think outside of the racial system in which he lived in. Though *Pudd’nhead Wilson* contends with problems of both race and sexuality, she writes, these problems were made “impossible to resolve by the history of racial and sexual thinking in America” – a history that of course shaped Twain’s own mind. In this respect, she writes, “*Pudd’nhead Wilson* exemplifies the tragedy of the imagination.” And yet, I would suggest, if this is so, the tragedy must be extended to the reader as well. The feeling of “powerlessness” exemplified by the novel’s ending is not a matter of wishing an alternate fate for the two boys, or for Roxy; rather, the feeling of “powerlessness” engineered by Twain’s novel is an expression of one’s own inability to think outside of the binary: a sense at the ending.

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177 Ibid.


180 Ibid., 412.
that one is trapped in a system of racial thinking, and perhaps even “irreversibly damaged” by it.

If this novel can be described as a “tragedy” then, it does not end in the reader’s tears, but rather in a kind of recursive recoil. *Huckleberry Finn*, Leslie Fiedler writes, is a novel “steeped in horror,” but “it is easier to know this than to feel it.”181 In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, he observes, this “horror” not merely known, but felt. Carolyn Porter describes a similar experience; the ending of the novel, she writes, provokes “a kind of moral vertigo in the reader.”182

There is no way to read this and other comparable passages without succumbing to a kind of ethical nausea. But there may be a way to account for such passages by suggesting that the aggression Roxana’s plot unleashes in Twain’s text is driven out of control by the horror that provokes it, so that Twain gives in to the temptation to turn that aggression against Roxana herself.183

And yet, I would suggest, if the novel induces “moral vertigo,” this is not because we are appalled *at it* – at Twain’s “aggression” towards Roxana – it is rather because we have been made to be *participant* in that aggression, an aggression turned not only back “against Roxana” but back against ourselves. The “ethical nausea” that Porter describes is a product of the intensely precise moral crosscurrent that Twain choreographs at the novel’s end. Indeed, *precisely* the same rational, sympathetic and finally *moral* impulse that bridles at the violent divisions in Roxy – the desire to amend these divisions, to unify her, to “resolve” her parts, both as an individual and as an imagination – comes to be precisely the *same* desire for “resolution” that produces the deeply *immoral* result of the ending, that sends Tom down the river, and that excludes Chambers from Dawson’s Landing. If there is a “tragedy” in this text, then, it is expressed as a horror at the realization of one’s enlistment in this dire ending, a horror at the

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181 Fiedler, “As Free,” 250.
183 Ibid., 410-11.
divisions in our own mind, at our inability to “resolve” the problem of race even in our own imagination. “A little violence has of course to be used now and then, in fitting some unusual patterns to some on or other of these few symbols,” Galton warns in Finger Prints; in Pudd’nhead it is a violence done to ourselves.

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In 1906, Mark Twain anonymously published a serious philosophical discourse entitled “What is Man?” The unusual essay takes the form of a dialogue between a Young Man and an Old Man who educates the Young Man in the matters of life. “I think the mind is purely a machine, a thoroughly independent machine, an automatic machine,” says the Old Man, in the characteristic position of the essay.184 “A man is never anything but what his outside influences have made him. They train him downward or they train him upward – but they TRAIN him; they are at work upon him all the time.”185

Only after Twain died, in 1910, was his authorship revealed. He had been working on this “gospel” since 1898, but had only published it late in life, perhaps worried that it might offend some of his earlier readers.186 But the essay’s position echoes much of Twain’s writing in Pudd’nhead Wilson. When Tom learns that Roxy is his mother, Twain writes, “In several ways his opinions were totally changed, and would never go back to what they were before, but the

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185 Ibid., 45-46. Twain’s later readers have often understood What is Man? as a dark expression of both automatism and determinism.
main structure of his character was not changed, and could not be changed.”

As Wilson’s calendar informs us, “training is everything.”

As Eric Sundquist has observed, Chambers’s fate at the novel’s end suggests that “it is imitation, training, practice and habit that have created the category of ‘nigger.’” But Twain goes further than this, I would argue. Indeed, as the novel continually demonstrates, “imitation, training, practice and habit” has shaped not only Chambers, but the reader as well. As William James wrote, “so far as we are thus mere bundles of habit, we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves.” In Pudd’nhead, it is we who are the “stereotyped creatures,” the “imitators and copiers.” If “the category of ‘nigger’” is recognizable as a category at all, it is because we too have been subject to a form of training; our own mind is shown to be as subject to the “fiction” of race as Chambers’s is – as divided, and as bound. Indeed, throughout the novel, race is shown to be an ingrained habit of thought, with deep roots of association in the mind; so ingrained, in fact, that we “see” a black face in places where the novel tells us there is none. We are part of the system too; we too have been trained.

“Whatsoever a man is, is due to his MAKE, and to the INFLUENCES brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations,” the Old Man asserts.

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187 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 70.
188 Ibid., 34.
189 Sundquist, “Mark Twain,” 49.
190 William James, Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Life’s Ideals, based on 1892 lectures; 1899, in Writings 1878-1899, edited by Gerald E. Myers, 705-887 (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 751. Twain’s essay uses the term “stream of thought” and echoes a number of key ideas drawn from William James’s account of “Habit” in Principles. James visited Twain in Italy in the year of Pudd’nhead’s composition; James left him a copy of Principles.
191 Twain, What is Man?, 5.
not even a thought.” When the Young Man despairs of this situation, the Old Man consoles him. “There is no help for him,” then, says the Young Man. The Old Man replies:

No help for him? No help for this chameleon? It is a mistake. It is in his chameleonship that his greatest good fortune lies. He has only to change his habitat – his ASSOCIATIONS. But the impulse to do it must come from the OUTSIDE – he cannot originate it himself, with that purpose in view. Sometimes a very small and accidental thing can furnish him the initiatory impulse and start him on a new road, with a new idea. … The chance reading of a book or of a paragraph in a newspaper can start a man on a new track and make him renounce his old associations and seek new ones that are IN SYMPATHY WITH HIS NEW IDEAL: and the result, for that man, can be an entire change of his way of life.

Y.M. Are you hinting at a scheme of procedure?
O.M. Not a new one—an old one. Old as mankind.
Y.M. What is it?
O.M. Merely the laying of traps for people. Traps baited with INITIATORY IMPULSES TOWARD HIGH IDEALS.

As I hope has become clear by now, Pudd’nhead Wilson presents the reader with just such a trap, one “baited with initiatory impulses toward high ideals.” As Twain rather glibly warns us in the very first line of the novel: “Tell the truth or trump – but get the trick.” If we are horrified at the end of the novel by our own sense of immobility, by our own participation in the “stalemate” of the ending, by our own imaginative failure to do anything other than participate – that is to say, if we are trapped – Twain, I have suggested, puts us here. And in traps, we can be re-trained. Indeed, as Twain points out, if our minds are literally shaped by our associations, by our “outside influences,” by the chances of life, then by the same token, new habits, “new

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192 Ibid. Twain was accused of plagiarism more than once. I discuss this briefly in Chapter 4.
193 Ibid., 46.
194 Ibid., 46-47.
195 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 5.
tracks” can be laid with the “chance reading of a book.”

In this respect, Hershel Parker’s biting assessment of the novel is not entirely wrong; as he rightly points out, the novel is in a sense, a “trick” – “faked, palmed off as a genuine novel like another good novel.” Even contemporary readers of the novel were somewhat baffled by the text. As one 1895 reviewer observed,

The literary critic is often puzzled how to classify the intellectual phenomena that come within his ken. His business is of course primarily with literature. A work may be infinitely amusing, it may abound even with flashes and touches of genius, and yet the form in which it comes into the world may be so crude, so coarse, so erring from the ways of true classicism, so offensive to immemorial canons of taste, that the critic, in spite of his enjoyment and wonder, puts it reluctantly down in the category of unclassifiable literary things only to take it up and enjoy it again.

Indeed, to call a novel a “trap” is, in some sense, not to call it a novel at all, but rather an “unclassifiable literary thing,” an “intellectual phenomena.” Indeed, though Pudd’nhead Wilson was enjoyable, the reviewer concluded, “it cannot be called in any sense literature.” As for Those Extraordinary Twins, “one is amused and laughs unrestrainedly but then the irksome question comes up: What is this? is it literature? is Mr. Clemens a ‘writer’ at all?”

But if the novel fails as a fully “realized” aesthetic artifact, it does so, I would suggest, in the service of an extremely serious and ambitious mode of work – a work that is intended to extend well past the moment of the novel’s reading. In spite of Tom’s many resolutions to reform himself throughout the novel, he continually drops “gradually back into his old frivolous

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196 Parker, Flawed, 145.
198 Ibid., 244.
199 Ibid.
and easy-going ways.” The insight holds for the reader as well; knowing that Roxy’s race is an arbitrary designation does little to alter its fact; fictions become ingrained in the body and mind in indelible ways. Thus if fiction itself – a novel – seeks to reform the reader, it will have to do more than merely assert; rather, it will have to begin the hard counter work of re-training. As William James wrote, in a text that Twain drew upon for “What is Man,"

the physiological study of mental conditions still remains on the whole the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics. The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. … We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar. The drunken Rip Van Winkle, in Jefferson’s play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, ‘I won’t count this time!’ Well! he may not count it, and a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less. Down among his nerve-cells and fibres the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out. Of course, this has its good side as well as its bad one. As we become permanent drunkards by so many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral, and authorities and experts in the practical and scientific spheres, by so many separate acts and hours of work.

If, as Dewey asserted, an image could be understood as “a habit of acting, bodily and conscious,” then the practice of reading could itself be a means of materially shaping one’s character. Our own actions in this text are counted amongst our “nerve-cells” – if we have participated in virtue and vice in this novel, it has perhaps, hopefully, left its “little scar.”

200 Twain, Pudd’nhead, Modern, 70.
201 James, Principles, vol. 1., 127.
CHAPTER III. PHYSIOLOGY
Reading *Principles of Psychology*

1. Galton’s Paradox

In 1890, William James published *The Principles of Psychology*, his masterful study of what he called “the science of finite individual minds.” The work, which ran to 1,400 pages, did not present a “closed system”; rather, James said, it was “mainly a mess of descriptive details, running out into queries which only a metaphysics alive to the weight of the task can hope successfully to deal with.” James presented no original research, nor any statistical evidence, but drew instead from a broad range of sources, by turns philosophical and anecdotal. This was, James argued, part of the nature of the inquiry. What James called the “unfinished-seeming” quality of the book was precisely the mark of its engagement with the living mind.

In *Principles*, James’s account of imagination drew directly upon Francis Galton’s studies of mental imagery. James devoted five full pages of his chapter to extracts from *Inquiries Into Human Faculty*, and referred readers to Galton’s original for further detail. Indeed, James had been sufficiently impressed by the breakfast-table questionnaire to distribute it in his own classroom; “for many years,” he said, he had collected descriptions of mental imagery from

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2 Ibid., vii.
3 Ibid.
4 In James’s personal copy of *Inquiries Into Human Faculty*, housed at Houghton Library, in Cambridge, the chapter on mental imagery has been neatly sliced out. There is no other marginalia.
“each and all” of his psychology students.⁵ His returns, he reported, corroborated Galton’s findings and shed light on what he called the “curious idiosyncrasies” of imagination.⁶

James’s research confirmed that mental imagery differed widely amongst individuals. In order to illustrate the possible range of response, James reprinted two of the extraordinary accounts he had gathered in his own survey — one from each end of the visualizing spectrum.⁷ When asked to picture that morning’s breakfast table, James’s “good visualizer” reported that he could mentally “see” the table with perfect clarity, down to the precise tone and pattern of the china.⁸ Colors were especially vivid, and the objects on the table were clear and bright in his mind. “‘There is very little limitation to the extent of my images,’” he told James. “‘I can see all four sides of a room, I can see all four sides of two, three, four, even more rooms with such distinctness that if you should ask me what was in any particular place in one, or ask me to count the chairs, etc., I could do it without the least hesitation.’”⁹ By contrast, James’s “poor visualizer” reported that he could only perceive the “‘faintest impressions’” of images in his mind – and even these as if “‘through a thick fog.’”¹⁰ When it came to the breakfast table, the man said, “‘there is nothing definite about it. Everything is vague. I cannot say what I see.’”¹¹ “‘Perhaps the only color I can see at all distinctly is that of the tablecloth,’” he said. “‘And I could probably see the color of the wall-paper if I could remember what color it was.’”¹²

⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid., 57.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
In the literary and historical account of the late nineteenth century, it has become commonplace to note that sensory perception could no longer be understood as a reliable source of knowledge. Vision especially became an agent of illusion rather than truth. In the first half of the century, an outpouring of research into the nature of vision radically changed the understanding of sensory perception. As Jonathan Crary has shown, Hermann Helmholtz’s *Treatise on Physiological Optics* (1856-66), marked the culmination of this shift; in it, Helmholtz summarized a number of studies which suggested that vision could no longer be understood to operate along the clear lines of the camera obscura, the eye passively projecting the exterior world into the mind. Rather, the eye, which for centuries had been understood as a transparent organ, was revealed to be a far more complex, fully integrated component of the human body – inconsistent and individual, prone to error. As Martin Jay has observed, “by the nineteenth century, what many have called the hegemonic scopic regime of the modern era … was beginning to waver as never before.”

Yet, even while the understanding of physical sight was shifting, the rhetoric describing the mind’s eye could continue to adhere to the metaphor of the camera obscura. Indeed, in spite of the disruption of the relation between knowledge and perception, it was entirely possible to continue to understand knowledge as deeply – even intrinsically – related to the task of mental picturing. Helmholtz’s investigations, amongst others, had troubled the idea of the mind as a theater for visual perception, but the relation between words and mental images was governed by neither physics nor physiology. Thus, while the eyes could no longer be said to project a clear

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and consistent picture into the theater of the mind, words (whether read on the page or heard aloud) could nevertheless continue to be understood to produce mental pictures, projected clearly and consistently into the space of the mind.¹⁴

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Richard Rorty traces the legacy of this tradition.¹⁵ As he points out, the camera obscura remained the dominant model of philosophical thought well into the nineteenth, and even twentieth century. Beginning with Descartes in the seventeenth century, a long and robust tradition of philosophy took as its premise the idea that the mind functioned as a kind of mirror, with words as a prompting agent. What John Dewey called the “spectator theory of knowledge” associated *knowing* with mental *seeing*.¹⁶ For philosophers after Descartes, the question, “Do you know John?” meant “can you reproduce his likeness in the mind?” The task of the philosopher, then, was to assess the quality of these reproductions – an interior representation, prompted by a word, that could be observed just as any other object in the world.

As I have argued, Galton’s 1880 publication of “Statistics of Mental Imagery” disrupted the idea that words predictably or even reliably produced “pictures” in the mind, thus troubling

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¹⁴ As W. J. T. Mitchell explains, in an “empirical” model of thought, “a word is an image of an idea, and an idea is an image of a thing” (*Iconology*, 22). The relation could be diagrammed thus:

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\text{[“MAN”]} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{[Idea of man]} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{[real man]}
\]

\begin{align*}
\text{Word} & \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Idea or Mental Image} \\
\text{Object or Original impression} &
\end{align*}

By the end of the nineteenth century, the unobstructed logic of this transfer had been thoroughly troubled by experiments with vision. Color blindness and cataracts meant that objects were not necessarily reflected into the mind with clarity; afterimages and aurae suggested that images at times had no referents at all. But it nevertheless remained possible to retain a full belief in the transparency of the reverse transaction – the transition from words to images and their referenced objects. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).


more than a century of philosophic and literary debate over the nature of mental representation.\textsuperscript{17}

Though William James credited Gustav Fechner with the earliest investigation of mental imagery, it was Galton’s 1880 study, James wrote, that had “made an era in descriptive Psychology”\textsuperscript{18}:

Until very recent years it was supposed by philosophers that there was a typical human mind which all individual minds were like, and that propositions of universal validity could be laid down about such faculties as ‘the Imagination.’ Lately, however, a mass of revelations have poured in which make us see how false a view this is. There are imaginations, not ‘the Imagination,’ and they must be studied in detail.\textsuperscript{19}

This observation, drawn from Galton, led James to suggest a resolution to a centuries-long philosophic debate over the nature of thought. Locke had famously posited the idea that our minds possess a “‘general idea’” of a triangle – one which was “‘neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once.’”\textsuperscript{20} Berkeley had disagreed. Even a word such as \textit{man}, Berkeley argued, could not be visualized in the abstract.

“‘The idea of man that I frame to myself,’” Berkeley wrote, “‘must be either of a white, or a black, or a tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man.’”\textsuperscript{21} With regard to Locke’s “general” triangle, Berkeley dismissed the idea outright: “‘If any man has the faculty

\textsuperscript{17} From \textit{Talks to Teachers} (based on 1892 lectures; 1899): “One of the most important discoveries of the ‘scientific’ sort that have recently been made in psychology is that of Mr. Galton and others concerning the great variations amongst individuals in the type of their imagination. Everyone is now familiar with the fact that human beings vary enormously in the brilliancy, completeness, definiteness, and extent of their visual images. … the recent discovery of distinct brain-areas for the various orders of sensation would seem to provide a physical basis for such variations and discrepancies. The facts, as I said, are nowadays so popularly known that I need only remind you of their existence. … teachers have been recommended to sort their pupils in this way, and treat them as the result falls out. You should interrogate them as to their imagery, it is said, or exhibit lists of written words to their eyes, and then sound similar lists in their ears, and see by which channel a child retains most words” (Talks, 790). William James, \textit{Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Life’s Ideals}, based on 1892 lectures; 1899, in \textit{Writings 1878-1899}, edited by Gerald E. Myers, 705-887 (New York: The Library of America, 1992).

\textsuperscript{18} James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 50.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 49-50.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{21} James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 1, 469.
of framing in his mind such an idea of a triangle as is here described, it is vain to pretend to
dispute him out of it, nor would I go about it. ""22

The debate between Berkeley and Locke centered upon the quality of images in the mind,
but at its heart was an assumption that the mind was a space of visual representation. Both
philosophers began with the premise that a given word – whether man or triangle – would
conjure a picture into the mind. The disagreement over the nature of ideas (general or particular)
hinged largely upon the description of the nature of the “picture” that the idea was said to invoke
(vague or sharp). James resolved the debate in a single stroke: the dispute between Berkeley and
Locke was not a question of philosophy, James posited, but rather one of psychology. Each
man’s position, James suggested, had been influenced by his own innate mental capacities. As
James observed, Galton’s questionnaire had revealed that mental images might be “either distinct
and adequate or dim, blurred, and incomplete.”23 “It is likely that the different degrees in which
different men are able to make them sharp and complete has had something to do with keeping
up such philosophic disputes as that of Berkeley with Locke over abstract ideas,” James wrote.24
Theories that had governed philosophy for more than a century could now be reduced to the
differences between individuals and their unassimilated mind-stuff. If “scopic regimes” were
failing, here was another instance – this time in the mind.25

22 James, Principles, vol. 2, 49.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Such considerations had led Galton to make his composite portraits, a statistical “picture” and a replacement for
the mental space that could no longer be properly represented. In these, Galton literalized the debate between
Berkeley and Locke; by compiling many images of Berkeley’s specific men, Galton was able to produce an actual
representation of Locke’s “general” man. Indeed, Galton had offered the composite photograph as “the picture that
would rise before the mind’s eye of a man who had the gift of pictorial imagination in an exalted degree” (Inquiries,
223-4); in the absence of a stable model of mental imagery, Galton would provide a proxy by which all could
partake of the “exalted” imagination of a select few.

Galton had proposed the composite photograph as a model of thought before he undertook the breakfast-table
inquiry. But though his questionnaire had revealed the vast diversity of mental imagery, Galton nevertheless held
When Alexander Bain, a prominent philosopher and psychologist, reviewed Galton’s publication of the “Statistics of Mental Imagery,” he noted that while many of the responses were “in accordance with our previous theoretical knowledge of mind,” the survey had also produced some responses that were “startling and paradoxical.”

At the lowest end of the spectrum, Galton had identified a class of respondents whose powers of visualization were “nil.” For Bain, the long-held belief in ideas-as-images made such a class nearly inconceivable. Indeed, the Cartesian model of thought was so well established that it presented a “paradox” to conceive of thought without visual images. “One can hardly be expected to rest content with an answer like this,” Bain wrote. “What ideas do they possess of anything? Do they find any available substitutes for the visualizing power?” he asked.

In *Principles*, James acknowledged that Galton’s study indeed presented a problem for traditional psychology – or any model of thought based upon visual images. “Those cases of extremely deficient mental imagery of whose existence Mr. Galton has made us aware,” James wrote, seemed to present the “appearance of paradox.” A person whose visual imagination is strong finds it hard to understand how those who are without the faculty can think at all,” he

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27 Ibid., 571.
28 Ibid.
29 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 265.
continued, seeming to address Bain directly. Yet, though it might be “hard to understand” a model of thinking without images, thought was nevertheless occurring. “An exceptionally intelligent friend informs me that he can frame no image whatever of the appearance of his breakfast-table,” James wrote.

When asked how he then remembers it at all, he says he simply ‘knows’ that it seated four people, and was covered with a white cloth on which were a butter-dish, a coffee-pot, radishes, and so forth. The mind-stuff of which this ‘knowing’ is made seems to be verbal images exclusively. But if the words ‘coffee,’ ‘bacon,’ ‘muffins,’ and ‘eggs’ lead a man to speak to his cook, to pay his bill, and to take measures for the morrow’s meal exactly as visual and gustatory memories would, why are they not, for all practical intents and purposes, as good a kind of material in which to think?

In this seminal passage, the breakfast table is Galton’s – but James shifts the terms of the experiment. In his questionnaire, Galton had asked his respondents to “call up” a series of mental images and to compare the image with “the actual sensation” the object would produce. Thus, in the test for taste imagery, Galton prompted respondents with a list of foods: “salt, sugar, lemon juice, raisins, chocolate, currant jelly.” But the list relied implicitly on prior experience; a person who had never tasted “currant jelly” could not “call up” the flavor, regardless of mental

30 James, *Principles*, vol. 2, 57.

31 In a footnote, James added a comment on the nature of his own mental imagery: “I am myself a good draughtsman, and have a very lively interest in pictures, statues, architecture and decoration, and a keen sensibility to artistic effects. But I am an extremely poor visualizer, and find myself often unable to reproduce in my mind’s eye pictures which I have most carefully examined. – W. J.” (*Principles*, vol. 2, 53). In a second note, he added: “I am myself a very poor visualizer, and find that I can seldom call to mind even a single letter of the alphabet in purely retinal terms. I must trace the letter by running my mental eye over its contour in order that the image of it shall have any distinctness at all. On questioning a large number of other people, mostly students, I find that perhaps half of them say they have no such difficulty in seeing letters mentally. Many affirm that they can see an entire word at once, especially a short one like ‘dog,’ with no such feeling of creating the letters successively by tracing them with the eye. – W. J.” (*Principles*, vol. 2, 61). James, then, was an “extremely poor visualizer,” and there is the tantalizing possibility that James’s “exceptionally intelligent friend” is James himself.


33 It is rarely noted that the “breakfast-table” in this passage is Galton’s.

34 Ibid., 256.
disposition. James corrected for this, and in so doing, reoriented the significance of the experiment from prior towards future experience. The “‘coffee,’ ‘bacon,’ ‘muffins,’ and ‘eggs’” here begin as words and end as objects; the man orders his meal, it appears. Galton had focused on the process whereby a sensible object was translated into a word and then an image in the mind; James began with an image in the mind, which became a word and then a sensible object.

James thus took the perceptual experience implicit in Galton’s questionnaire and foregrounded it as the basis and measure of the imagination. While one could not know the quality of imagery in James’s “exceptionally intelligent friend” – or indeed, in the mind of any individual – the objects on the table could, in some sense, be said to “represent” the acts of imagination that had preceded them. Whereas Berkeley and Locke had assumed that mental images would in some way reproduce their objects, James’s model of thought did not rely on any notion of “copying.” The images in the mind of the “poor visualizer” – if they could be called images at all – might indicate the number of chairs at the breakfast table without in any way resembling them. For James, the test of the mental image then, was not in the quality of its likeness, as Berkeley and Locke had presumed, but in its ability to conjure. Galton, like Berkeley and Locke, had set out to define the transaction between the world and the mind; James reversed the terms altogether. If Galton had asked his respondents to “call up” the image of “currant jelly,” this was James’s question too; in this case, however, the jelly was to appear on the table.35

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35 When James later formulated his philosophy of pragmatism, he abandoned many of the claims he had made in *Principles of Psychology*. But even as James’s thinking changed, the fundamental diversity of the imagination remained a first fact. Invocations of the variety of mental imagery appear at key moments in each of his major works, from his earlier volumes, *The Will to Believe* (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), to his mature expressions of philosophy in *Pragmatism* (1907) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). Throughout his writing, James continued to describe mental representation as a process of conjuring, one marked by the prophetic action of pointing – a gesture which would become the hallmark of his pragmatic method. Indeed, though over the course of his lifetime, James revised much of what he had put forth in *Principles*, it was precisely this new model of mimesis that he retained, one that shifted the definition of “knowledge” from past reference to future experience. As John Dewey put it, “the whole of pragmatism in an embryo” could be found in *Principles* (“Development,” 10). Indeed, James’s turn towards the doctrine of “radical empiricism” – a key tenet of his pragmatist
This insight became the very basis for James’s famous articulation of the “stream of thought.”\textsuperscript{36} James here drew upon a series childhood reminiscences written by a man named Mr. Ballard, a deaf-mute who had used the “natural signs of pantomime” to communicate with his family as a child.\textsuperscript{37} James excerpted Ballard’s account at length: before he had learned words, Ballard said, he was nevertheless able to conceptualize the shape of the earth, the origin of stars

philosophy – can be said to begin with the rejection of the mind as a space of clear pictures. James first outlined the doctrine in his seminal essay, “A World of Pure Experience” (1904). There he addressed what he called “the cognitive relation” – the relation between subjects who “know” and objects that might be “known” (“World,” 1165). Though James suggested that the actual quality of this “knowing” remained somewhat “mysterious,” it could be easily illustrated with a thought experiment, one which drew directly from a psychological account of mental imagery:

Suppose me to be sitting here in my library at Cambridge, a ten minutes’ walk from ‘Memorial Hall,’ and to be thinking truly of the latter object. My mind may have before it only the name, or it may have a clear image, or it may have a very dim image of the hall, but such intrinsic differences in the image make no difference in its cognitive function. … For instance, if you ask me what hall I mean by my image, and I can tell you nothing, or if I fail to point or lead you towards the Harvard Delta, or if, being led by you, I am uncertain whether the Hall I see be what I had in mind or not, you would rightly deny that I had ‘meant’ that particular hall at all, even though my mental image might to some degree have resembled it. (Ibid., 1166)

James here reprises the scene at the breakfast table. As he points out, the mental image might appear in any kind or quality of “stuff” – verbal or visual, “dim” or “clear” – but if James could “point or lead you towards the Harvard Delta” – that is, towards the hall itself – it mattered little what sort of image appeared in the mind.\textsuperscript{35} When James arrived at the hall, met there by a friend (or by the reader) then the mental concept of “Memorial Hall” could be said to truly “represent” its object, regardless of the quality of the mental image that had preceded it.

For James, this was not a metaphorical pathway, but a literal one. Indeed, the “halting places” of the mind were places in which two individuals might actually halt. As James’s description of the “Harvard Delta” indicates, for James, these pathways were literal. “Knowing” an object that was not immediately present to the senses – the hall, or the currant jelly, or, in a famous example, the “tigers in India” – meant providing a pathway to the object indicated. At the end of the trip to India, one would approach the living tiger – “our conceptual idea of him” now having “led us to his lair” (“Tigers,” 855). The process was no different than one in which “we took a voyage to India for the purpose of tiger-hunting and brought back a lot of skins of the striped rascals which we had laid low” (Ibid., 853-4).


\textsuperscript{36} Though it is well known that “The Stream of Thought” begins as a dismissal of an atomistic or empiricist understanding of thought, James’s only surveys of mental imagery are rarely (if ever) mentioned in this account. That is to say, the chapter is largely understood as a philosophic intervention, rather than a psychologic one.

\textsuperscript{37} James, Principles, vol. 1, 266.
and the meaning of thunder. Though Ballard did not accurately deduce the answer to these questions, James presented his recollections as proof that “a deaf and dumb man can weave his tactile and visual images into a system of thought quite as effective and rational as that of a word-user.” By Ballard’s account – indeed, by the very fact that Ballard was writing at all – the reader could infer that “it makes little or no difference in what sort of mind-stuff, in what quality of imagery, his thinking goes on.” He continued,

The only images intrinsically important are the halting-places, the substantive conclusions, provisional or final, of the thought. Throughout all the rest of the stream, the feelings of relation are everything, and the terms related almost naught. These feelings of relation, these psychic overtones, halos, suffusions, or fringes about the terms, may be the same in very different systems of imagery. … One gets to the conclusion by one line, another by another; one follows a course of English, another of German, verbal imagery. With one, visual images predominate; with another, tactile. Some trains are tinged with emotions, others not; some are very abridged, synthetic and rapid, others, hesitating and broken into many steps. But when the penultimate terms of all the trains, however differing inter se, finally shoot into the same conclusion, we say and rightly say, that all the thinkers have had substantially the same thought. It would probably astound each of them beyond measure to be let into his neighbor’s mind and to find how different the scenery there was from that in his own.

James could not of course account for the precise mechanism by which these “trains” of thought adhered. But regardless of the particular “quality of imagery” in the mind — “verbal,” “visual” or “tactile,” vague or vivid — all that mattered, James reasoned, was that the “terms” of thought hung together. If the existence of the “poor visualizer” had presented a problem for philosophy, it

38 Ballard is a favorite of James’s. I will address this directly in my fourth chapter. As we shall see, Ludwig Wittgenstein will contest this precise passage.

39 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 266.

40 Ibid., 269.

41 Ibid., 269-270.
was one easily solved. In place of a model of mind based on the clarity of the camera obscura, governed by the logic of mirrors and light, James proposed a model based on the obscurity of “overtones,” “suffusions” and “halos.” All that was required, in other words, was to replace a model based on vision with one based on feeling.\footnote{James was deeply unsatisfied with – even contemptuous of – Hume’s suggestion that the mind’s eye consisted of “copies and representations” of sensory impressions. “The slightest introspective glance,” he wrote, “will show to anyone the falsity of this opinion” (\textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 46). In illustration of this point, James asked his readers to simply imagine a page of writing. “Hume surely had images of his own works without seeing distinctly every word and letter upon the pages which floated before his mind’s eye” (Ibid.). In an early essay “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” (1884), James put the point more forcefully: Hume’s fantastical assertion that we can form no idea of a thing with either quality or quantity without representing its exact degrees of each, has remained an undisputed dogma in nominalistic minds, until Mr. Galton and Prof. Huxley, or perhaps M. Taine, first called it in question. Strange that so patent an inward fact as the existence of ‘blended’ images could be overlooked! Strange that the assertion could virtually be made that we cannot imagine a printed page without at the same time imagining every letter on it – and made too by a school that prided itself particularly on its powers of observation! However, of such blunders is the history of psychology composed. (‘Omissions,’” 989)

It was clear of course to James – as to his readers – that one could imagine a book without literally visualizing the entire text. Indeed, the page of reading was the object that most clearly illustrated the flaw in any account of thought that posited the images in the mind as a series of reproductions.

In refuting Hume’s theory, James explicitly referenced Galton’s “‘blended’ images” – the composite portraits that Galton had presented as an analogue for mental imagery. These images, James suggested, represented a closer approximation of the “fundamental facts of consciousness” than any Hume had presented. It was “preposterously false,” James wrote, to suggest that “the only things we can mentally picture are individuals completely determinate in all regards” (\textit{Principles}, vol. 1, 471-2). Huxley, one of Galton’s contemporaries, had, James said, “set the matter straight” (\textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 46). As Huxley had observed:

‘No one possesses a memory so good, that if he has only once observed a natural object, a second inspection does not show him something that he has forgotten. Almost all, if not all, our memories are therefore sketches, rather than portraits, of the originals – the salient features are obvious, while the subordinate characters are obscure or unrepresented.’ (Ibid.)

As Huxley pointed out, mental images were always fundamentally incomplete – “sketches” rather than “portraits” of their original objects. In this regard, Huxley continued, the “‘mental operation’” was similar to the “‘formation of compound photographs’” (Ibid.). When the faces of six individual sitters were combined, “‘the final result is that all those points in which the six faces agree are brought out strongly, while all those in which they differ are left vague’” (Ibid., 47).

It was precisely this quality of “vagueness” that James wished to emphasize. James thus drew upon Galton’s composites in order to argue that, as he put it, “OUR IMAGES ARE USUALLY VAGUE” (Ibid., 45). Indeed, James wrote, “it is the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention” (\textit{Principles}, vol. 1, 254). “Galton and Huxley,” James wrote, had “made one step in advance in exploding the ridiculous theory of Hume and Berkeley that we can have no images but of perfectly definite things” (Ibid., 254-5). “But these reforms,” James continued, are not half sweeping and radical enough. What must be admitted is that the definite images of traditional psychology form but the very smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this
James’s “poor visualizer” had reported that he could only perceive the “‘faintest impressions’” of images in his mind – and even these as if “‘through a thick fog.’”

When it came to the breakfast table, he had found the scene impossible to describe. “‘Everything is vague,’” the man had said. “‘I cannot say what I see.’” Yet, though the man could not use language to adequately describe the scene of his mind, this did not necessarily mean that the mind was empty; it just meant that language was inadequate to the task. Thus, in an often-quoted passage, James explains,

We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use.

The and, if, and but of thought were precisely those “fringes” of relation that James was so keen to preserve against the discrete images – substantives – which had been the primary subject of philosophical consideration for the past century or more. As James pointed out, the “poor visualizer” knew without “seeing”; Ballard knew without “saying.” Both were able to know nevertheless. James’s model of thought was thus concerned to account for mental objects that could neither be represented nor described. As James observed, “namelessness is compatible

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43 James, Principles, vol. 2, 57.
44 Ibid., 56.
45 James, Principles, vol. 1, 245-6.
with existence.” All that was required to resolve Galton’s “paradox” was to attend to those “dumb or anonymous psychic states” that had “been coolly suppressed” by empirical models of mind: the ands, ifs and bys of thought.

James’s commitment to the “dumb or anonymous” has often been understood as a form of what Richard Poirier has called “linguistic skepticism.” In his seminal reading of James, Poirier locates his work in a genealogy of “Emersonian pragmatists” – a tradition of American writers who recognized that “language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness.” For Poirier, James’s acknowledgement of the failures and distortions of language represents a humane effort to remain open to new ideas – to resist structures of knowledge based upon a fixing “certainty.” Thus, in Poirier’s account, James’s philosophy is one “that recommends ‘vagueness’ as a counteraction to the dogmatizing of existent truth and as the necessary condition for the exploratory search for new truths.”

And yet, if James has been valued because of his move towards the model of “vagueness,” he has often been critiqued because of his insufficient adherence to it. “Language works against our perception of the truth,” James wrote, but, as Poirier notes, “there are very few stylistic indications in his writing that he suffers for it, or that he feels it as a threat to his way of carrying himself in the world.” James’s interest in affirming “dumb or anonymous psychic

46 Ibid., 251.
47 Ibid., 245-6.
49 Ibid., 3-4.
50 Ibid., 42.
51 Ibid., 41-2.
52 James, Principles, vol. 1, 241; 27.
states” would seem to suggest a parallel commitment to structures of expression that in some way convey the mute feeling of those *ands, ifs, and buts* — the unacknowledged fringes of thought. But these never quite materialize in James’s own writing. James – a philosopher, lecturer and teacher – was, as Poirier puts it, “determined on lucidity.” Unlike Emerson, James seems to write “more from a distance, and hence more clearly, as if, being outside the problem, he were being asked only to sort it out.” In this respect, James’s “skepticism about language” seems merely “theoretical in nature.”

Thus, though “vagueness” and “dumbness” were perhaps commended by James in *Principles*, James’s style seems to embody precisely opposing values – strangely, even stubbornly, clear and articulate. The disjunction between James’s style and his philosophy has been a source of ongoing difficulty for readers of James. While critics such as Steven Meyer, Ross Posnock and, most recently, Joan Richardson, have located James within a poetic and literary tradition that includes Emerson, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein, amongst others, James is generally faulted for a failure to fully pursue the stylistic implications of his own philosophy. For James, Meyer writes, “the enemy was opacity of meaning, whether the experience in writing of inspiration – of the writing running ahead of consciousness, of one having meant more than one could know – or the experience of indeterminacy, of the impossibility of getting down to the bottom of what something might mean.” Even a reader as eager to credit James’s poetics as

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54 Ibid., 26-7.
55 Ibid., 26.
Richardson has noted that James’s experiments in language, such as they were, were limited by his respect for “the ingrain’d habits of his audiences.”

And yet, I would argue, these appraisals somewhat characteristically misplace the primary field of James’s concern. James did of course lament the “vicious” use of language in analyzing experience: language often cut up the stream of our own thought, and distorted the possibilities for its perception. But if James’s stylistic choices have seemed somewhat mysterious, this is perhaps because we have not been looking in the right place. Indeed, I would argue, the change James seeks to effect is not in language at all. The change, rather, is in us.

What distinguishes James and the other writers I am examining in this dissertation is a belief in the cognitive – that is to say, a belief in the embodied site of the mind of the reader as a field of work, one made amenable to such exploration by new theories of the imagination. As a writer and lecturer, James was, as Poirier puts it, “entangled.” James sought mightily to “make himself culturally available” – to speak clearly. To speak in this way (really to keep talking at all) meant also to falsify the experience he sought to describe. And yet, for James, I will argue, the abiding and permanent entanglement of language with the body suggested a basis for mutual understanding.

“We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold,” James wrote. The passage is often read as a call for a new kind of poetics, but while many critics have discussed the


58 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 275.


60 Ibid., 94.

importance of the *and, but and by* in this passage, *blue* and *cold* are little noted. For James, a psychologist, the “feeling of *blue*” was a very specific *kind* of feeling – embodied, objective, cognitive, grounded in the material link between the body and mind. It is worth, perhaps, quoting the full paragraph:

> We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. Consider once again the analogy of the brain. We believe the brain to be an organ whose internal equilibrium is always in a state of change — the change affecting every part. The pulses of change are doubtless more violent in one place than in another, their rhythm more rapid at this time than at that. As in a kaleidoscope revolving at a uniform rate, although the figures are always rearranging themselves, there are instants during which the transformation seems minute and interstitial and almost absent, followed by others when it shoots with magical rapidity, relatively stable forms thus alternating with forms we should not distinguish if seen again; so in the brain the perceptual rearrangement must result in some forms of tension lingering relatively long, whilst others simply come and pass.\(^{62}\)

James here makes an analogy between the structure of language and the structure of the brain, grounded in the shared logic of the kaleidoscope. For Galton, the constant “perceptual rearrangement” that James describes here – one that “shoots with magical rapidity” at times, “always in a state of change” – ensured our mutual isolation. To understand the imagination as subject to the body meant that each of us were bound – locked into the contingencies of both heredity and environment. For James, by contrast, the link between the imagination and the body gave meaningful shape to the irremediably wild space that Galton’s study had set forth. If the relation between mind and body had produced more illusions in the world – or led to, as in “The

\(^{62}\) James, *Briefer*, 162.
Yellow Wallpaper,” the possibility of insanity, automatism and self-deception – James, we shall see, enlisted the mechanism of the illusion in order to create a new set of stable meanings, grounded in the function of the imagination itself.

II. Writing a Paradox

In Principles, James presented no original research, nor any statistical evidence, but drew instead from a broad range of sources, by turns philosophical and anecdotal. As Gerald E. Myers has written, Principles, though a masterwork, nevertheless took part in a tradition of “armchair psychology, of psychological theorizing that never experimented, which had prevailed through the first half of the nineteenth century.” But while James’s scientific method could hardly be called experimental, it is little noted that Principles documents one experiment that James did undertake, the results of which he himself collected, over many years, with many respondents: the breakfast-table inquiry.

As Richard Poirier has noted, “there are in fact only a very few calculated discussions about language” to be found in James’s work. And yet, though James did not talk a great deal about language, he did talk a great deal about reading and writing. The debate over the nature of mental imagery involved a question about the relation between words and their attendant images – a question, in other words, about reading. In Principles and throughout his work, James thus

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64 Poirier, Poetry, 93.
turned to reading often – as both a test of his psychology and proof of its validity. Indeed, though linguistic experimentation seems curiously lacking in James’s writing, there are, in fact, dozens of experiments in language to be found in James’s work – all of them, like the breakfast-table questionnaire, to be undertaken by the reader.

An early example appears in “The Function of Cognition” (1885), an essay that, he later noted, would contain “much of the account of the truth-function developed later in Pragmatism.”65 James there alluded to the “comparative study” of mental imagery, which had only recently disrupted the idea that words came associated with predictable, shared images:

Even in the sphere of sensation individuals are probably different enough. Comparative study of the simplest conceptual elements seems to show a wider divergence still. And when it comes to general theories and emotional attitudes towards life, it is indeed time to say with Thackeray, ‘My friend, two different universes walk about under your hat and under mine.’66

The question here – How do we know one another? – had once been posed by Thackeray; but as the quote implies, a question that had once been asked (and answered) through recourse to literature was now a question for psychology. As a psychologist himself, James’s response to this question was clear: Though the “comparative study of the simplest conceptual elements” had shown a wide divergence between imaginations, it was nevertheless possible for two people to meet in understanding.67 Though the precise mechanism of this meeting remained somewhat obscure, the process could nevertheless be illustrated through an “experiment.” The passage is


66 Ibid., 850.

67 Ibid., 852.
worth quoting in full:\textsuperscript{68}

Let an illustration make this plainer. I open the first book I take up, and read the first sentence that meets my eye. ‘Newton saw the handiwork of God in the heavens as plainly as Paley in the animal kingdom.’ I immediately look back and try to analyze the subjective state in which I rapidly apprehended this sentence as I read it. In the first place there was an obvious feeling that the sentence was intelligible and rational and related to the world of realities. There was also a sense of agreement or harmony between ‘Newton,’ ‘Paley,’ and ‘God.’ There was no apparent image connected with the words ‘heavens,’ or ‘handiwork,’ or ‘God’; they were words merely. With ‘animal kingdom’ I think there was the faintest consciousness (it may possibly have been an image of the steps) of the Museum of Zoology in the town of Cambridge where I write. With ‘Paley’ there was an equally faint consciousness of a small dark leather book; and with ‘Newton’ a pretty distinct vision of the right-hand lower corner of a curling periwig. This is all the mind-stuff I can discover in my first consciousness of the meaning of this sentence, and I am afraid that even not all of this would have been present had I come upon the sentence in a genuine reading of the book, and not picked it out for an experiment. And yet my consciousness was truly cognitive. The sentence is ‘about realities’ which my psychological critic – for we must not forget him – acknowledges to be such, even as he acknowledges my distinct feeling that they are realities, and my acquiescence in the general rightness of what I read of them, to be true knowledge on my part.\textsuperscript{69}

How was it possible to confirm that James had “true knowledge” about Newton, Paley or God if his thoughts in no way resembled those figures? The reader, placed in the position of “psychological critic” is here confronted with the problem of the “poor visualizer.” Given James’s rather tattered and fragmentary mental vision of “Newton” (“the right-hand lower corner of a curling periwig”), how could one know that he was properly referring to the man?

\textsuperscript{68} Unfortunately, I must beg my reader to actually read the block quotes! My argument depends upon them. I can only “point” to some of the effects I am describing in his writing.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 848.
Yet though James is ostensibly describing a philosophical problem here, he also clearly demonstrates the potential literary problem presented by the diversity of mental imagery. James here narrates his own reading process: Approached with a sentence, he explains precisely what went through his mind as he read it. But James’s act of introspection implicitly suggests the reader’s own, also enjoined to read the same sentence on the present page. While it was of course possible that the reader, like James, experienced a “vision” of the “lower corner of a curling periwig” when approached with the word “Newton,” it nevertheless remained highly unlikely that the reader’s mental imagery – such as it was – would in any way resemble James’s.

As James points out here, the problem of mental representation led immediately to a problem of mutual understanding. Indeed, after presenting the passage, James himself highlighted the problem posed by the diversity of mental imagery: “This singularly inadequate consciousness of mine, made up of symbols that neither resemble nor affect the realities they stand for, – how can he be sure it is cognizant of the very realities he has in mind?”70 But James here presents a clear answer to the question posed by his “psychological critic” – and, I would add, by the reader as well. As in Principles, James turned to the predictive logic that allowed his “exceptionally intelligent friend” to “speak to his cook.” All that was required for James and his critic (or reader) to meet was to work “in the direction” in which the words “seem to point”:

Thus I may develop my thought in the Paley direction by procuring the brown leather volume and bringing the passages about the animal kingdom before the critic’s eyes. I may satisfy him that the words mean for me just what they mean for him, by showing him in concreto the very animals and their arrangements, of which the pages treat. I may get Newton’s works and portraits; or if I follow the line of suggestion of the wig, I may smother my critic in seventeenth century matters pertaining to Newton’s environment to show that the word ‘Newton’ has the same locus and relations in both our minds. Finally

70 Ibid., 848-9.
I may, by act and word, persuade him that what I mean by God and the heavens and the analogy of the handiworks, is just what he means also.71

Given that two individuals could not be said to share common mental imagery, they may nevertheless meet at a series of common objects – a portrait of Newton, a copy of his works. James’s resolution to Galton’s “paradox” would be the same then for reading as it would be for psychology. The mental imagery of James’s “exceptionally intelligent friend” may not in any way have resembled the physical appearance of “‘coffee,’ ‘bacon,’ ‘muffin’ and ‘eggs’,” but when the table was set, the man and his cook could be said to have understood one another’s meaning. The instance of reading was no different. As James repeated, “the pivot and fulcrum and support of this mental persuasion, is the sensible operation which my thought leads me, or may lead, to effect – the bringing of Paley’s book, of Newton’s portrait, etc., before his very eyes.”72 James here relocates the definition of literary “image” from the “inner” regions of the mind toward outwardly observable objects and experiences. Indeed, the image produced by the sentence – the image brought “before” the reader’s “very eyes” in this case – is here no longer imagined at all, but perceptual – a literal physical object: Paley’s book, Newton’s portrait, the “very animals” described.

For James, the virtue of such perceptual encounters was their “dumb” immediacy. “Comparative study of the simplest conceptual elements” had disrupted the idea that a given word would conjure a predictable image to the mind. For James then, the answer lay in the types of experiences that lay outside of mental representation altogether. James’s response to Thackeray was clear:

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
What can save us at all and prevent us from flying asunder into a chaos of mutually repellent solipsism? Through what can our several minds commune? Through nothing but mutual resemblance of those of our perceptual feelings which have this power of modifying one another, *which are mere dumb knowledges-of-acquaintance*, and which must also resemble their realities or not know them aright at all.\(^{73}\)

At moments of “dumb acquaintance” James theorized, an object required no translation into the mind – and thus circumvented the problem of mental imagery altogether.\(^ {74}\) James’s mental image of “eggs” might not resemble eggs – nor might it resemble the “eggs” in the mind of any other individual on earth – but when two individuals met at a shared object of perception no mental representation was necessary. The eggs were simply *there*. The relation between words and their attendant images had been disrupted by psychological surveys of the imagination; thus it was precisely the “dumbness” of this knowledge – its simple wordless presence – that made it a resource in mitigating the distance between diverse imaginations. If the imagination could no longer be understood as a site of shared meaning, James put his faith in the kind of experiences that required neither translation nor re-presentation into the mind – experiences, in other words, that required no imagination at all.

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For James as a philosopher, “dumb” experience was the way out of the problem of the diversity of the imagination. But faith in “dumb” states created a rather strange predicament for a writer, enjoined to use those now unfaithful instruments – words. Indeed, though James *describes* a problem of reading in this passage, the insights must also of course apply to his own writing – the reading that we were undertaking at that very moment. As James clearly illustrates here,

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 850-1.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 850.
conceiving of the imagination as a field of diverse imagery introduced opacity into the transmission between writer and reader: James “saw” a periwig; the reader, presumably did not. In order to demonstrate the variety of mental imagery, James had prompted his readers to undertake this “experiment”; but inviting such disruption into one’s writing could seem to produce the very solipsism that James was at pains to dispel. If, as Thackeray suggested, the gulf between individual “universes” had previously been bridged by the act of reading, now the act of reading seemed the best demonstration of the gulf itself.

And yet, upon introducing this problem into his text, James does not fear that he and his reader will fly up into isolated worlds, each now reduced to islands of solipsism – in reading as in life. James’s solution for his “psychological critic” was the same as that for his own reader: “In the last analysis, then, we believe that we all know and think about and talk about the same world, because we believe our PERCEPTS are possessed by us in common,” James wrote.75 “We see each other looking at the same objects, pointing to them and turning them over in various ways, and thereupon we hope and trust that all of our several feelings resemble the reality and each other.”76 If one were to doubt this theory, James proposed an example:

What I am for you is in the first instance a percept of your own. Unexpectedly, however, I open and show you a book, uttering certain sounds the while. These acts are also your percepts, but they so resemble acts of yours with feelings prompting them, that you cannot doubt I have the feelings too, or that the book is one book felt in both our worlds.77

This was not much of a hypothetical, of course. It was the very task he had just narrated in the text itself:

75 Ibid., 849-50.
76 Ibid., 844.
77 Ibid., 850.
Suppose “I open and show you a book.”

He had of course described this act, just moments before: “I open the first book I take up, and read the first sentence that meets my eye,” he wrote – in this case, a sentence about Newton, Paley and God.

Suppose he were to go on “uttering certain sounds all the while.” And he had of course done this just moments before, explaining precisely what had gone on in his mind while reading the words of a sentence – in this case, sounds about “curling periwigs.”

Wouldn’t these acts “resemble acts of yours?”

And of course, these acts did at that very moment, resemble acts of ours, as readers also enjoined to read the same sentence about Newton, Paley and God – or indeed, any sentence on the page before us – including the sentence we were reading at that very moment.

Thus, though we may be forced to “hope and trust” that we “all know and think about and talk about the same world,” the faith was not a difficult one. The very fact of his writing, and of the reader’s reading of it, was itself proof of the premise. As James pointed out, “without the practical effects of our neighbor’s feelings on our own world, we should never suspect the existence of our neighbor’s feelings at all and of course should never find ourselves playing the critic as we do in this article.” The task of reading itself formed a kind of “dumb” evidence – experimental, experiential, and above all, felt: “the book is one book” here, now and “in both our worlds.”

If the sentence before the reader had provided a ground for a demonstration of Galton’s

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78 James delivered this essay as a lecture after its first publication.
79 Ibid., 844.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 850.
“paradox,” the book before the reader thus provided a site for its resolution. Reader and writer could no longer perhaps meet in reading – in the imaginative leaps produced by Thackeray’s novels, for example – but they could nevertheless meet at books, the one object the writer and reader were sure to share. Indeed, by James’s own example, the images materially conjured by a sentence would often be images of other books: James and his “critic” would know they mutually shared an idea of the “animal kingdom” once James had gone about “procuring the brown leather volume and bringing the passages about the animal kingdom before the critic’s eyes.”

Yet, though the book in the reader’s hand provided James with a convenient (even crucial) site for meeting the reader, James’s account of reading seems somewhat impoverished here. “My demonstration in the last resort is to his senses,” James wrote. But the feeling lingers that the “sense” produced by a sentence might now be merely sensory – reduced to the “brown leather volume” in which Paley wrote his “passages about the animal kingdom.” The book in our hands becomes a common perceptual object, real and “felt in both our worlds” – but by “felt,” James here seems to mean no more than the feel of the book’s binding. Indeed, in none of these

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82 Ibid., 849.

83 Indeed, if this paradigm were to be applied to works of imagination – fiction – the diversity of mental imagery would present an impasse. As James noted, there was one case in which the “solipsism of individual worlds could not be bridged” (Ibid., 845). “Every one knows Ivanhoe,” James wrote, but “few would hesitate to admit that there are as many different Ivanhoes as there are minds cognizant of the story” (Ibid.). Whereas in the case of the earlier sentence one could refer to the sensible objects implied by the terms there – Newton’s curling periwig, for example – for Ivanhoe there was no such recourse. As James put it, “there is no real ‘Ivanhoe,’ not even the one in Sir Walter Scott’s mind as he was writing the story. That one is only the first one of the Ivanhoe-solipsisms” (Ibid.).

Each reader, then, would be reading a book utterly different than each other reader’s book, a perfect “solipsism.” James here turned again to objects as a way of mitigating the distance between reader and writer. The only way in which these “solipsisms” ever became shared was by making the book into something other than “a story pure and simple” – that is to say, by making the “story” into an object (Ibid.):

Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe got itself printed in volumes which we all can handle, and to any one of which we can refer to see which of our versions be the true one, i.e., the original one of Scott himself. We can see the manuscript; in short we can get back to the Ivanhoe in Scott’s mind by many an avenue and channel of this real world of our experience… (Ibid.)

As this passage implies, James’s account of imagination demanded that literary interpretation take into account both the content of Ivanhoe, but also the books it “got itself printed in” (Ibid.). This seems obvious, of course – how
cases does the meaning of the words particularly matter. “I open the first book I take up, and read the first sentence that meets my eye,” James writes; as he points out, he might have chosen any sentence for the “experiment.” “I open and show you a book, uttering certain sounds all the while,” but the book in this case might have been any book – the point was only the uttering of the “sounds,” not what the sounds themselves meant.

The attempt to address or amend Galton’s “paradox” in writing here produces a kind of paradox of its own. Steven Meyer has described James’s “conception of representation” as “inadequate” to his philosophy.84 Meyer discusses a moment in James’s essay, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” (1904) in which James calls attention to the reader’s act of reading – though, I would add, Meyer might have chosen many more. There, as in “The Function of Cognition,” James suggests that the reader take note of the very book in his or her hands. “Let [the reader] begin with a perceptual experience, the ‘presentation,’ so called, of a physical object,” James instructs: “his actual field of vision, the room he sits in, with the book he is reading at its centre.”85 As Meyer points out, the book would seem to define James’s common reader, who could be defined with certainty only in terms of the experience of reading the article James was currently writing. The book or journal that contained the article would simultaneously be at the center of the room and in the reader’s mind – not to speak of all of this also being in James’s mind and in the center of the room he was sitting and writing in. Typically, however, James did not address the

would we know any Ivanhoe if it hadn’t, indeed “got itself printed” – but James’s focus on the “manuscript” seems to remove the writer entirely from the process of interpretation. The book had merely, somehow, “got itself printed.” In this case it seems as if Ivanhoe might likewise be reduced to “printed volumes” of itself. If two readers were to meet, their conversation would ultimately be reduced to an act of consulting the “manuscript.” That is to say, each of us can all go back to the manuscript to “check” if our Ivanhoe “resembles” the “real” Ivanhoe – but this checking seems to consist of the kind of typographic “checking” that James denied when he said that Hume was making an error in thinking of the page as a series of black marks.

84 Meyer, Irresistible, 217.

Pandora’s box of self-reflexivity he opened here with his gesture to the very words he was writing as he was imagining the reader reading them. … For him, and certainly for most of his readers as well, books may often have been the objects closest to hand; yet he did not consider, as Emerson would have, what effect this was having on his philosophy. (The effect of this curious failure of curiosity, or nerve, on James’s writing was obvious: the famous clarity of style survived intact.)

Meyer here faults James for his “famous clarity of style,” his resistance to—or even failure to understand—“the Pandora’s box” of representation he had produced at these moments. Though Meyer understands this to be a problem of James’s philosophy (and it may in fact be one), I would like to point out that it is also a literary problem, one that we see quite clearly in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman as well.

Indeed, James’s stylistic choices here seem to parallel those of Gilman. As I have argued, given the diversity of the imagination, Gilman, like James, turned to the page of reading as a resource—a strategy that produced the strange vertigo of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” There too, an attempt to “meet” the reader led to an attention to the act of reading, and likewise to the material surface of the page in the reader’s very hands. Indeed, Meyer’s description of “the book or journal” that would “simultaneously be at the center of the room and in the reader’s mind—not to speak of all of this also being in James’s mind and in the center of the room he was sitting and writing in” might easily be a description of the interpretive conundrum of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story in which the figure of the wallpaper seems to be an object coextensive with the field of the writer’s mind, the narrator’s mind, and ultimately the reader’s mind as well.

There too, the strange “transparency” of this series of representations seems only to reduce the text to an interpretive mess—or, as “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been described, a “maze of sign-reading.”

That, for both James and Gilman, the book in the reader’s hands should become the site of meeting seems relevant in light of the fact that a number of authors in this period seem to exhibit an “obsessional” and problematic attention to the materiality of the page of writing. In *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987), Michael Fried draws on James in his discussion of a similar attention in the work of Stephen Crane. For Fried, Crane’s style emerges from a naïve – even at times perverse – commitment to the realist mode of “seeing.” Fried takes Joseph Conrad’s famous preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897) as the paradigmatic expression of the realist novelist’s aspiration: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see,” Conrad writes. Referencing Conrad’s dictum, Fried explains:

By ‘mak[ing] you see’ Conrad of course had in mind making the reader visualize with special acuteness scenes and events which are not literally there on the page but which the letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs that are on the page somehow contrive to evoke. But what if, for reasons that are not entirely clear, Crane’s very commitment to a version of the ‘impressionist’ project – his attempt, before all, to make the reader see – at least intermittently led Crane himself to see, by which I mean visualize in his imagination, those things that, before all, actually lay before Crane’s eyes: the written words themselves, the white, lined sheet of paper on which they were inscribed, the marks made by his pen on the surface of the sheet, even perhaps the movements of his hand wielding the pen in the act of inscription? Wouldn’t such a development threaten to abort the realization of the ‘impressionist’ project as classically conceived? In fact would it not call into question the very basis of writing as communication – the tendency of the


88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., vii.
written word at least partly to ‘efface’ itself in favor of its meaning in the acts of writing and reading.\textsuperscript{90}

Fried understands this project – such as it could be called conscious at all – as fundamentally doomed, noting “the deeply conflictual nature, and in a sense the ultimate impossibility” of this “extreme version” of the realist enterprise.\textsuperscript{91} In an effort to make the reader “see,” Crane seems instead to have made the reader “see” only the marks on the page – and in the process, has rendered his own text a mere object. The problem is one of stylistic clarity – a “transparency” so “extreme” that it seems to double-back upon itself, resulting an opaque and illegible text. For Fried, an attention to the materiality of signification thus produces both a reductive materialism and an endless “self-reflexivity” – an interpretive impasse, and even an end to reading itself.

Though Crane’s reasons remain obscure, Crane seems to have exchanged the work of “visualizing in his imagination” for the work of “visualizing” the text itself; an exchange that, I would argue, James seems to have made as well, with all of its attendant interpretive problems. James’s stylistic response to the “paradox” presented by imaginative diversity was to make the text itself a site of meeting; if this strategy was intended to solve a literary problem, he seemed only produce an entirely new set of irresolvables — a kind of wormhole of interpretation.

But I would now like to suggest that the problematic of the “Pandora’s box,” one that James often and often invited into his work, serves an important rhetorical purpose for James – from \textit{Principles} to his later writing.\textsuperscript{92} I have argued that James, like Gilman, turns to the page of reading as a way of mitigating the disjunction produced by an acknowledgement of the diversity

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 119-20.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{92} While a comprehensive rewriting of the period’s attention to signification is outside the scope of this dissertation, I would nevertheless like to suggest that the turn to the page is neither an inevitable consequence of the “style of late capitalism” nor an unconscious outcropping of a realist project gone awry.
of mental imagery. Given the failure of the word to produce a predictable mental image, the only image that could reliably be produced – that could transmit experience – was the appearance of the page itself. In this respect, as both Meyer and Fried note, James seems to have undertaken a “deeply conflictual” and even “ultimately impossible” stylistic project. And yet, I will argue, it was precisely this “impossible” “conflict” that James sought to evoke.

As neither critic notes, the “irresolvable” problem of critical interpretation presented at these moments was explicitly theorized by the psychology of the time. For James, the very inability for the reader to mentally process “the very words he was writing as he was imagining the reader reading them” demonstrated a fact about the mind, common across diverse universes of solipsism. The understanding of reading had been disrupted by new studies of the imagination; for James, it was the very predictable form of this disruption that suggested a potential strategy for meeting the reader anew – an opportunity to shape the reader’s experience.

Reading James in this way, I will argue, helps to reframe an appraisal of James’s style. In this light, the “self-reflexive” turns produced by James’s vaunted “clarity” are neither a perversion of, nor unconscious outcropping of, his commitment to “transparent” meaning – or to put it another way, a misplaced commitment to the logic of realism. Rather, for James, the ineluctable, intractable, inevitable interpretive problem posed by an attention to the page of reading becomes the mark of the real itself. James seemed to produce an interpretive “paradox” at these moments, but for James, the feeling of a paradox had a specific and even crucial rhetorical function. Indeed, the experience of interpretive irreconcilability becomes a defining experience for James, one that would provide readers with a vocabulary of feeling – a feeling designed to last well beyond the time when the reader puts the book aside.
(1) Pas de lieu Rhône que nous.
(2) Von der Vottei mit is.
(3) Gui n'a beau dit, qui sabot dit, nid a beau dit elle.
(4) Mein die Uhr onbiss Nüss'.

Both of these experiments demonstrate in different fields the fact that the meaning read into sensations depends upon the set of the mind. In case of Fig. 22 the meaning suggested is "brain," and the outlines and convolutions are seen in accordance with it. In case of the foreign phrases the set of the mind is either "French" or "German," and you endeavor to give them meaning accordingly. The dominant set of associations makes it difficult to see or rather to hear the meaning of these "English" sounds.¹

¹ If you have failed to discover the meanings you will now notice that the sounds are identical, or nearly so with
1. Paddle your own canoe.
2. Wonder what time it is.
3. Gin a body kiss a body need a body tell.

Daniel Starch, *Experiments in Educational Psychology* (1911)
“Why not ‘pool’ our mysteries into one great mystery, the mystery that brain processes occasion knowledge at all?” James asks, in *Principles*.

It is surely no different mystery to *feel* myself by means of one brain-process writing at this table now, and by means of a different brain-process a year hence to *remember* myself writing. All that psychology can do is to seek to determine *what* the several brain-processes are; and this, in a wretchedly imperfect way, is what such writings as the present chapter have begun to do.93 James here describes the fundamentally “mysterious” task of “writing at this table now,” subject, in that very moment, to an obscure “brain process” that he himself could not define.94 James, Meyer notes, was “fascinated by the mechanics of reading.”95 And yet James, working nearly a century before the advent of contemporary neuroscience, would have to resign himself to what he himself described as a “wretchedly imperfect” project. “The link between brain and mind,” Meyer writes, had become “the ghost in James’s mechanics” – a link that would have to remain obscure until Gerald Edelman’s foundational work in cognitive science.96 Until then, Meyer writes, James’s “expanded psychology was little better than sleight of hand.”97

And yet, I will argue, James does in fact theorize the “ghost in the mechanics” – one quite precisely indicated by his reference to the act of “writing at this table now” “such writings

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93 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 689.
94 As Gerald E. Myers has written, “a recurrent theme in *Principles* is that from the standpoint of psychology cognition is inevitably a mystery, partly because the cognitive relation is primitive or irreducible” (*Life and Thought*, 273). The “apparent abyss” that was opened up by this mystery, Meyer writes, “threatened to make nonsense of James’s science” (*Irresistible*, 253). Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
96 Ibid., 251.
97 Ibid.
as the present chapter” – that is to say, the writing we must be reading at this very moment. Indeed, though James could not adequately account for the “brain process” that inheres in reading, this process was neither unknowable, nor unobservable. The “mystery” could not perhaps be described, but as he emphasized, it was, in fact, felt.

To explain this “mystery,” James turned to accounts of actual magic – familiar to him and to his readers from a popular discourse on illusion. Galton’s 1880 study had started from the premise that mental imagery had a “true kinship” with ordinary vision, a supposition based on the idea that the two faculties shared the same “nervous centre.”98 James’s account was founded upon the same premise. Though some had assumed that the seat of sensory input was distinct from the seat of imagination, James posited that “the same nerve-tracts are concerned in the two processes.”99 “The cortical processes which underlie imagination and sensation are not quite as discrete as one at first is tempted to suppose,” James wrote.100 “The imagination-process CAN then pass over into the sensation-process.”101 Indeed, James argued, such transfers were “by no means a thing of rare occurrence.”102

As we have seen, a mental image could in fact create a perception at times. “Visual perception,” James wrote, “supplies numberless instances in which the same sensation of vision is perceived as one object or another according to the interpretation of the mind.”103 In order to explain this phenomenon, James drew upon prior research into what was called “retinal rivalry,” a subject that Helmholtz had investigated in Physiologische Optik (1867), his landmark study of

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99 James, Briefer, 177.
100 James, Principles, vol. 2, 72.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
optics. Because the eyes are located a few inches apart, the images received on each retina differ from one another – and yet the two distinct images are nevertheless perceived as a single whole, “combined” together in the mind. The stereoscope, invented in 1838, exploited this phenomenon, and for Helmholtz became the basis for a series of experiments designed to explore the role of the mind in ordinary sight. Though some stereoscopic images were easily resolved, in other cases, it was nearly impossible to combine the two pictures without shifting attention from one side to another. *(Figure 1).* Remarkably, however, the task of uniting the pictures was significantly affected by the viewer’s “anticipatory imagination” of the image to be perceived.\(^{104}\) As Helmholtz explained, “‘When I have before my eyes a pair of stereoscopic drawings which are hard to combine, it is difficult to bring the lines and points that correspond, to cover each other, and with every little motion of the eyes they glide apart. *But if I chance to gain a lively mental image* (Anschauungsbild) *of the represented solid form* (a thing that often occurs by lucky chance), I then move my two eyes with perfect certainty over the figure without the picture separating again.’”\(^{105}\)

That is to say, the problem of combining the images was not merely *optical.* James here described a process called “*pre-perception,*” a term used to describe the ways in which the “premonitory imagination” of a sensory impression accelerated its recognition.\(^{106}\) This meant, for example, that it was easier to “catch” the single note of C in a chord if one had recently heard the note sounded alone. But James emphasized that such pre-perception need not come from an outer stimulus. Indeed, Helmholtz’s experiments with stereoscopes had revealed that *mental* imagery could function just as well as direct sensation in producing an attentive pre-perceptive

\(^{104}\) James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 439.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.
state. Once the viewer created this “inward reproduction” of the completed picture, even detailed images could be united with little trouble.\textsuperscript{107} Indeed, stereographic pictures could be easily combined or separated, Helmholtz wrote, “the moment I strive to \textit{imagine in a lively way how they ought then to look}.”\textsuperscript{108}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Figure 1. From William James, \textit{Principles of Psychology} (1890).}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{Figure 2. From William James, \textit{Principles of Psychology} (1890).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 438.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 441.
In order to illustrate this phenomenon, James included a set of diagrams in the text upon which the reader could make the experiment – a pair of hollow boxes. (Figure 2.) In each case, the boxes could be perceived in multiple ways. One could regard the lines as a flat pattern on the surface of the page; but it was also possible to perceive the figures as three-dimensional objects that could shift in perspective. In figures such as these, “where the result is ambiguous, we can make the change from one apparent form to the other by imagining strongly in advance the form we wish to see,” James wrote.109 Deciding, for example, whether the second figure was receding into the page (something like a cooking pot) – or protruding from it (something like a pyramid) – was an act of imagination.110

As James explained, the figured boxes were not unique, but represented the type of every case in which “an object is inconspicuous and hard to discern from the background.”111 He continued:

In the meaningless French words ‘pas de lieu Rhône que nous,’ who can recognize immediately the English ‘paddle your own canoe’? But who that has once noticed the

109 Ibid., 442.

110 While much has been written on the role of “attention” in James’s psychology, it has hardly been noted that, for James, attention and imagination were largely “interchangeable” terms. Indeed, James explained, attention itself consisted of nothing so much as “this reinforcing imagination, this inward reproduction, this anticipatory thinking of the thing we attend to” (Ibid., 439). The imagination was the attention; the attention was the imagination. The terms were interchangeable:

Let us show how universally present in our acts of attention this reinforcing imagination, this inward reproduction, this anticipatory thinking of the thing we attend to, is. … In Wundt’s and Exner’s experiments quoted above, the lying in wait for the impressions, and the preparation to react, consist of nothing but the anticipatory imagination of what the impressions or the reactions are to be. … But where both nature and time of signal and reaction are foretold, so completely does the expectant attention consist in premonitory imagination that, as we have seen (pp. 341, note, 373, 377), it may mimic the intensity of reality, or at any rate produce reality's motor effects. It is impossible to read Wundt's and Exner's pages of description and not to interpret the 'Apperception' and 'Spannung' and other terms as equivalents of imagination. With Wundt, in particular, the word Apperception (which he sets great store by) is quite interchangeable with both imagination and attention. All three are names for the excitement from within of ideational brain-centres, for which Mr. Lewes's name of preperception seems the best possible designation. … The image in the mind is the attention; the preperception, as Mr. Lewes calls it, is half of the perception of the looked-for thing. (Ibid.)

111 Ibid., 443.
identity can fail to have it arrest his attention again? When watching for the distant clock to strike, our mind is so filled with its image that at every moment we think we hear the longed-for or dreaded sound. So of an awaited footstep. Every stir in the wood is for the hunter his game; for the fugitive his pursuers. Every bonnet in the street is momentarily taken by the lover to enshroud the head of his idol.112

James presents a series of analogies here – all likened to the diagrams James included above. The French words – italicized nonsense on the page – are “resolved” into English once they are read aloud, or, alternately, articulated in what Galton called “the mental ear.”113 The transformation of the sight of the words into a meaningful sound (whether uttered aloud or simply imagined) was, James said, precisely the same kind of effect that one experiences when “shuttling” between aspects of the boxes – now concave, now convex. In reading the words, which, upon first appearance, seem French, we expect their meaning to come in that language. Just as the figured boxes might change with an “anticipatory imagination” of the desired perception, the “translation” of the written “French” into a meaningful English phrase requires a turn of the mind.

As we have seen, this was the same effect that governed the perception of “faces” in a fire – or, as I have argued, the discovery of a “woman” in the wallpaper. Indeed, in a footnote, James could “not refrain from referring” to Lotze’s account of “‘quietly lying and contemplating a wall-paper pattern.’”114 Like the figured boxes, the “‘arabesques of monochromic many-convoluted lines’” of the pattern could shift in aspect. In watching the wallpaper, Lotze wrote, “‘sometimes it is the ground, sometimes the design, which is clearer and consequently comes

112 Ibid.; James, Briefer, 225-6.
113 Galton, Inquiries, 79.
114 James, Principles, vol. 1, 442.
nearer.””\textsuperscript{115} James here included another diagram in the text, upon which the reader could make the experiment – in this case, a six-pointed star. Like the wallpaper, or the unstable figures above, the star could be perceived in multiple ways: “We see it sometimes as two large triangles superposed, sometimes as a hexagon with angles spanning its sides, sometimes as six small triangles stuck together at their corners.”\textsuperscript{116} (Figure 3.)

\textit{Figure 3. From William James, \textit{Principles of Psychology} (1890).}

Lotze had argued that the shifts he perceived in the wallpaper were the result of the fatigue of the physical eye, appearing most often in the “‘process of becoming drowsy.’”\textsuperscript{117} James disagreed. The appended star, he argued, illustrated conclusively that the shifts were not related to the movement of the eye, but to that of the mind:

These variations [in the star], which everyone will have noticed, are, it seems to me, easily explicable by the very unstable equilibrium of our ideational centres, of which constant change is the law. \textit{We conceive} one set of lines as object, the other as

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
background, and forthwith the first set becomes the set we see. There need be no logical motive for the conceptual change, the irradiations of brain-tracts by each other, according to accidents of nutrition, ‘like sparks in burnt-up paper,’ suffice.\textsuperscript{118}

In James’s own terms, the mind could be understood as a network illuminated randomly at times, ‘like sparks in burnt-up paper.’” As one moved between “aspects” of the figure – now “large triangles,” now “hexagon” – “the irradiations of brain-tracts by each other” produced the “conceptual change.”\textsuperscript{119} The theory could not, of course, be tested through direct observation; what James called “brain-experience” was a fact resolutely confined to the interior of the skull.\textsuperscript{120}

But if the irremediably various minds of various individuals all tripped in the same way – if we could all be duped alike – it likewise made sense that we all shared the same mental apparatus. These perceptual illusions thus formed the basis for documenting what could not otherwise be seen; the imagination of another individual could not be directly observed, but its mechanism could be tested.

James presented his reader with no empirical evidence for the theory of “irradiations,” but the hypothesis could, he suggested, easily be tested. As James pointed out, the effect produced by shuttling between the two “aspects” of a six-pointed star or hollow box was not specific to boxes, or even to French phrases, but could be undertaken with “any word on this page.”

Take the already-quoted catch, \textit{Pas de lieu Rhône que nous}: one may read this over and over again without recognizing the sounds to be identical with those of the words \textit{paddle your own canoe}. As we seize the English meaning the sound itself appears to change. Verbal sounds are usually perceived with their meaning at the moment of being heard. Sometimes, however, the associative irradiations are inhibited for a few moments (the

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 1, 4.
mind being preoccupied with other thoughts) whilst the words linger on the ear as mere echoes of acoustic sensation. Then, usually, their interpretation suddenly occurs. But at that moment one may often surprise a change in the very feel of the word. … This is probably the reason why, if we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. Let the reader try this with any word on this page. He will soon begin to wonder if it can possibly be the word he has been using all his life with that meaning. It stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no speculation in it. Its body is indeed there, but its soul is fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way, but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it, and rapidly passed from it to the other words of the phrase. We apprehended it, in short, with a cloud of associates, and thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than as we feel it now divested and alone.¹²¹

For James, the shift between “aspects” of a hollow box was no different than the shift between the dead “body” of the word and its living “soul.” The change could not of course be outwardly observed – the box remained resolutely fixed on the page; the word was printed in ink – but the distinction between the two aspects – convex, concave; dead, live – was nevertheless distinct and observable. As James notes, at these moments, “the very feel of the word” was transformed.

Without tools with which to investigate the brain, it was hard to say precisely why this was so – but it was nevertheless an observable quality of perception. James, like Sully and Galton, attributed the change to the “associative irradiations” produced by the quick and shifting movements of a mind that moved “‘like sparks in burnt-up paper.’”¹²² In its original use, the quote, from a poem by James Russell Lowell, was an allusion to the effects of a lover’s presence.¹²³ James here, however, uses the phrase to describe the capricious movement of the

¹²¹ James, Principles, vol. 2, 80-81.
¹²² James, Principles, vol. 1, 442.
¹²³ The line is from “The Courtin’” (1864):
mind – a movement governed by “accidents of nutrition” as well as anything else. As we have seen, conceiving of the mind as an engine with “no logical motive” introduced both automatism and indeterminacy into the act of interpretation. It was to suggest that a lover’s action (and Lowell’s poetry, for that matter) was as ascribable to effects of “nutrition” as it was to complex feelings, intentions and emotions. For Galton, acknowledging the mechanical or “automatic” nature of the imagination – its ineluctable tendency to “be set a-going by a trifle,” to interpret – random shapes into a meaningful face, random dots into a meaningful pattern, random afterimages into spiritual visions, random mental images into poetic evocations – produced a sense of our isolation: all meanings contingent; all meanings individual.124

For James, however, the imagination’s function of interpretation became its unifying feature. As James pointed out, the “variations” in a six-pointed star were ones that “everyone will have noticed” – if they had not, they would surely now, after receiving James’s instruction.125 Indeed, the task of rendering a living word into “glass” (and back again) was one that every reader could perform – it was, after all, the condition of reading itself. Thus, if we could not match one another in sensory perception (each of us color-blind), nor in the mental field (each of us diverse), we could nevertheless meet in the common function of our mental apparatus. “My experiences and yours,” James wrote, existed for “the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another.”126 But though we might remain “unimaginable to

She heered a foot, an’ knowed it tu;
A-raspin’ on the scraper, —
All ways to once her feelin’s flew
Like sparks in burnt-up paper.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Lowell’s poetry figures prominently in Helen Keller’s writing as well.


125 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 442.

126 James, “World,” 1162.
one another,” the imagination itself – the interpretive mechanism – was the one thing we could be said to share.

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In *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987), Michael Fried takes James’s “glass eye” passage as emblematic of a larger concern about signification in the period’s literature. James’s account of what happens when we “look at an isolated printed word and repeat a word long enough,” Fried writes, “is relevant to the entire class of devices I have been considering.”127 As Fried points out, the very act of reading requires that writing in some sense become transparent. When one reads, the black marks on the page become “repressed” as the implied meaning of those same marks emerges.128 Written words then, can *either* be understood as *words* – the reader becoming unconscious of the optical appearance of the letters on the page – or as *marks*, material shapes. For Fried, James’s invocation of “a glass eye, with no speculation in it” defines the quality of this distinction.129 Here, as in any case when the “materiality of writing” comes “unimpededly to the surface,” Fried argues, “the writing in question would be cease to *be* writing and become *mere mark*.130

In this context, the attention to the materiality of the letters on the page becomes a threat to the writer who (Fried presumes) wants to produce writing. Indeed, if a writer took an attention to the page too far, one’s writing would become nothing *more* than a series of shapes. One might easily extend this reading to Gilman’s story, a narrative in which the “glass eye” of the word

128 Ibid., xiv.
129 Ibid., 131.
130 Ibid., xiv.
seems to stare back at the reader with the same strange “look” as the “bulbous eyes” of the wallpaper – a face turned upside down.\(^{131}\) Thus, for Fried, James’s chosen metaphor – the “glass eye” – seems to aptly register the essentially sinister nature of an attention to the page of writing – an author’s latent expression of the implicit “threat” it poses to the work of writing itself.\(^{132}\) As we have seen, however, Gilman’s attention to the page need be understood as neither “sinister” nor inadvertent. Indeed, though Fried seeks to describe the “threat” to the writer here, I would argue that he quite accurately describes the effect, not upon the writer, but rather upon the reader.

Fried draws on James’s choice of metaphor, but he also provides many metaphors of his own: In Fried’s words, “the question of what it means for writing in writing to be an object that can be seen and hence represented” produces a series of interpretive problems in Crane that are “torturous.”\(^{133}\) A similar effect, in Thomas Eakins’s painting, produces “a tension or competition between two fundamentally different modes of seeing” – one so acute that it amounts to what he calls an “outright disjunction” and “an ineluctable collision.”\(^{134}\) In the end, the painting, like Eakins (and Fried) himself, becomes “divided or excruciated between competing systems of representation.”\(^{135}\) As Fried puts it, “the viewer” – and I would add, the critic – “ends up suspended between conflicting possibilities in relation to the work – not quite excruciated or stupefied… but nevertheless baffled, even frustrated, in that sense brought to a stand.”\(^{136}\)

For Fried, then, the effort to resolve a text that plays with the “glass eye” produces if “not


\(^{132}\) Fried, *Realism*, 62.

\(^{133}\) Ibid., xiv.

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 72; 74; 87.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 88.

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 73-4.
quite” excruciation, then at least some kind of real discomfort – a painful division of attention. One might recall accounts of reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” that likewise seem to produce not only “bafflement” and “frustration,” but something near “excruciation,” a kind of physical illness – a headache produced by the attempt to “watch the paper” while also reading it. And yet, though Fried uses James’s description of the “glass eye” to evidence the ways in which an attention to the page effectively ends interpretation, he hardly notes that James invites – and directly prompts – this experiment. This experiment itself was, in fact, precisely the point of the passage. As James himself observed, “perception is to a certain extent baffled by this manoeuvre.”\textsuperscript{137} Indeed, to be “baffled” in this instance provided visceral evidence of the mind’s mechanism at work.

As James sought to demonstrate, the interpretive impasse produced by the attention to the page – what Fried calls its “ultimate unresolvability” – was characterized by a particular and definable feeling of mind, something like the “headache” of Gilman’s text.\textsuperscript{138} Galton had observed the “slight sense of discomfort” that occurs when switching between rival interpretations of a series of dots.\textsuperscript{139} “There is a somewhat similar sense of discomfort,” Galton wrote, “when a visual object has been interpreted in a particular fashion, and suddenly a different interpretation of it is forced upon us.”\textsuperscript{140} James Sully had likewise described the “strenuous effort of imagination” required to move between rival aspects of an unstable image. In particularly difficult “puzzles,” he noted – cases in which “patterns much brighter than the ground,” or patterns in which “known objects, as flowers” were represented – “a strong effort of imagination

\textsuperscript{137} James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 80.
\textsuperscript{138} Fried, \textit{Realism}, 87.
\textsuperscript{139} Galton, “Free-Will,” 409.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 408.
will often suffice to bring about a conversion of the first appearance.”

This effect is now known as “cognitive dissonance,” a term used to describe a “state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent.” Thus for example, an individual believes that the world will end on a certain date; when the date passes, the believer experiences a sense of cognitive dissonance, and amends his or her belief to match the new information – deciding now on a new (future) date for the arrival of apocalypse. The emotional or intellectual feeling of conflict in such cases has also been compared to a number of well-known perceptual effects. The act of reading the word blue printed in red for example, produces a similar kind of dissonance; indeed, in MRI examinations, this has been shown to activate the part of the brain associated with pain.

Though James, Galton, Jastrow and Sully preceded this science by half a century, it does not require sophisticated technology in theorize the “tension” produced by holding “two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent” at once. In the case of a hollow box, for example, the image could be understood either as concave or convex: “as we shift the attention from one portion of the view to another, or as we view it with a different mental conception of

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142 Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me) (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 13.

143 In my research on this point, I have found this cluster of associated effects to be far less theorized than I had expected. James, as usual, is extraordinarily prescient; his psychology is experiencing a resurgence nowadays – contemporary cognitive scientists re-discover his work.

144 Both Galton and Sully theorized that the feeling of “discomfort” one experienced when moving between competing aspects of an unstable image was the same feeling of “discomfort” one experienced when exerting the will. When presented with a field of dots, for example, one could perceive the dots in multiple groupings; as one moved from one perception to another, one experienced a “momentary heave of tumbling over” – the same feeling one had when “making up the mind” (“Free Will,” 408). The feeling of having a “different interpretation” of a perceptual object “forced upon us” was no different than the feeling of changing one’s intellectual or emotional “interpretation” of an abstract idea or concept. As one reached a conclusion, Galton argued, “the mind is shifted into a new position of stable equilibrium” – precisely the same “equilibrium” achieved once one had effected a change in the dots (Ibid.). Thus, the “wrench of the will” required to make the transition between two aspects of an unstable image was the same feeling that one experienced when trying to get out of a warm bed on a cold morning.
what the figure represents, it assumes a different aspect, and to our mental eye becomes quite a
different thing,” Jastrow writes. The two “things” one perceived in these cases were mutually
exclusive. Though one could quickly shuttle between perceptions – cooking pot/pyramid; black
on white/white on black; six stars/hexagon – one could not hold two simultaneous interpretations
in one’s mind for long – if at all. In precisely the same way, James theorized, the word on the
page was either dead or alive – or, to use Fried’s articulation, a mark or a word. For Fried,
James’s invocation of the “glass eye” characterizes the difficulty – if not impossibility – of being
conscious of the shape of the letters on the page while in fact reading those letters at the same
time. As Fried quite aptly observes, though “any word on this page” could be rendered “glass,” it
was nevertheless exceptionally difficult (if not impossible) to hold both aspects of the word in
the mind at once.

It was precisely this incompatibility that James sought to emphasize. For James, this
“slight sense of discomfort” – one that Fried seems clearly to have experienced himself –
suggested that the mind could be a space of concrete feeling. As James pointed out, the “effort”
one experienced when attempting to move between rival aspects of boxes, stars, or, indeed
words, though cognitive, was a perfectly observable, perfectly concrete, sensation – a particular
feeling of mind. When regarding a hollow box, or any unstable image, the static marks on the
page did not of course change, but the box could be nevertheless felt to transform – now
concave, now convex. When the nonsense French phrase resolves into English “the sound itself

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appears to change,” James wrote.\footnote{James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 80.} As the meaning of the phrase was “seized,” “the sensible quality changes under our very eye.”\footnote{Ibid.; James, \textit{Briefer}, 296.} At this moment “the very feel of the word” transforms.\footnote{James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 80.}

Though the “feel of the word” was elicited in a moment of reading, the “feeling” in this case could not be understood in the traditional sense by which literary effects are measured. The dominant metaphors of literary analysis in this period often evoke the twinned “feelings” of tears or nerves, sentiment or sensation; this was neither. Rather, James suggested, this feeling was the “bare” feeling of meaning itself.\footnote{James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 1, 253.} Indeed, the “feel of the word” that James describes here is neither poetic nor metaphorical, but the \textit{feeling of the letters being a word at all}. Such a feeling was utterly inarticulate, of course. Though the experiment could be tried with “any word on this page,” though the feeling could be generated in the \textit{material} of language (the word, dead or living), it could not be expressed \textit{by} language (try to describe the distinction!).

The indescribable, yet observable \textit{feeling} of this transformation suggested that it was a shared, even universal, feature of perceptual experience, located in the materiality of the brain’s “irradiations.” Indeed, though utterly and insistently “dumb,” James emphasized that the feeling of a word was a “perfectly definite” feeling.\footnote{Ibid., 472.} \textit{“The sense of our meaning is an entirely peculiar element of the thought,”} James wrote.\footnote{Ibid.} \textit{“This added consciousness is an absolutely positive sort of feeling, transforming what would otherwise be noise or vision into something understood.”}\footnote{Ibid.}
The difference between mere “noise” or “vision” (the shape on the page) and a meaningful word (“something understood”) was, James urged, “absolutely positive.” There was an actual sense, in other words, of making sense.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{153} For James, this inarticulable, yet “perfectly definite” feeling of meaning suggested a resolution to the philosophical dispute over mental images. In James’s early articulation of “the Stream of Thought” he drew again upon the distinction between the two aspects of a word. “The opposition of Feeling to Knowledge is quite a false issue,” James wrote (“Omissions,” 1005). “The contrast is really between two aspects, in which all mental facts without exception may be taken; their structural aspect, as being subjective, and their functional aspect, as being cognitions” (Ibid.). What, in one context, could be read as a word, could, in another context (or with another stare), appear to be mere marks on a page. The distinction between the two aspects of the word – dead or alive – was a matter of feeling. “\textit{Man} meant for \textit{mankind} is in short a different feeling from \textit{man} as a mere noise, or from \textit{man} meant for \textit{that} man, to wit, John Smith alone,” James wrote (Ibid.). “I may have both times exactly the same sound upon my lips and the same picture in my mental eye,” but the feeling in either case was utterly different. “Why may we not call that fact a ‘feeling’?” (Ibid., 1005). “Mere noise” or articulated meaning – each had a different “feeling” – perfectly definite, utterly observable, entirely impossible to describe.

In the former aspect, the highest as well as the lowest is a feeling, a peculiarly tinged segment of the stream…. Once admit that the passing and evanescent are as real parts of the stream as the distinct and comparatively abiding; once allow that fringes and halos, inarticulate perceptions, whereof the objects are as yet unnamed, mere nascencies of cognition, premonitions, awarenesses of direction, are thoughts \textit{sui generis}, as much as articulate imaginings and propositions are; once restore, I say, the \textit{vague} to its psychological rights, and the matter presents no further difficulty. (Ibid.)

“The difference between thought and feeling,” James wrote, “thus reduces itself, in the last subjective analysis, to the presence of absence of ‘fringe’” (Ibid.). The fringe was rather hard to theorize obviously, but James thought it consisted of those “associative irradiations” that were responsible for the transition between the two aspects: a quality which “with much probability” could be reduced to “the absence or presence of sub-excitements in other convolutions of the brain” (Ibid.).

As James pointed out, this “feeling” resolved the longstanding question about the nature of abstract thought. Galton had proposed the composite image as a resolution to the debate between Berkeley and Locke. By compiling many men into a single man, Galton had attempted to bridge the gap; the composite represented both one man and many. James suggested that Galton’s composite was not sufficient.

\textit{Man} meant for \textit{mankind} is in short a different feeling from \textit{man} as a mere noise, or from \textit{man} meant for \textit{that} man, to wit, John Smith alone. Not that the difference consists simply in the fact that, when taken universally, the word has one of Mr. Galton’s ‘blended’ images of man associated with it. Many persons have seemed to think that these blended or, as Prof. Huxley calls them, ‘generic’ images are equivalent to concepts. But, in itself, a blurred thing is just as particular as a sharp thing; and the generic character of either sharp image or blurred image depends on its being felt \textit{with its representative function}. This function is the mysterious \textit{plus}, the understood meaning. (Ibid., 1002)

James called this the “fringe” of thought, “a ‘feeling of tendency,’ whose neural counterpart is undoubtedly a lot of dawning and dying processes too faint and complex to be traced” (Principles, vol. 1, 472). James drew on the example that had defined the philosophical positions of Berkeley, Locke, (and, I would add, Galton) – that of the generic “\textit{man}”:

The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it, – or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same \textit{thing} it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood. (“Omissions,” 1003)

“The halo” itself was the distinction between something old, and something “newly taken and freshly understood”; that is to say, “the halo” was the term that James used to describe the felt distinction between two aspects of a figure – one that remained “the same \textit{thing} it was before,” but that nevertheless took upon a new “feel” when “freshly understood.”

For James, the distinction between the two “aspects” of the word could be extended to all “\textit{sense},” \textit{as such}. 
Fried describes the conflict between the legible and the illegible, between word and mark as a “‘primordial’ tension.” And yet, as Bill Brown has quite rightly pointed out, if the “tension” Fried identifies is indeed “‘primordial,’” it seems that we might find it in the work of any number of writers, at any number of times. “Does the materialization of writing in writing actually have what we can recognize as a history?” Brown asks. “Or does the ontological priority of writing’s materiality (its ‘grammarscentricity’ that transcends history) mean that we can only claim, after all, that various text repress and reveal this materiality variously?”

For the authors I am addressing in this dissertation – all of whom extend an attention to the act of reading – this attention does indeed appear in their various works to various ends. And yet, there is nevertheless a history here. For Gilman, for Twain, for James and, as we shall see, for Keller, the attention to the act of reading does indeed have a specific, identifiable, “perfectly definite” rhetorical purpose; deployed to different ends, perhaps, but unified in its understanding of the imagination as a potential site of first-hand – that is to say embodied – experience. What unites these authors, across texts, is not a belief in the threatening division of the sign; but rather, a common belief in the idea that the tension in the sign is in fact “primordial,” grounded in a shared structure of mind. Indeed, as we shall see, for James, a belief in a common interpretive

As James explained, “Man meant for mankind is in short a different feeling from man as a mere noise, or from man meant for that man, to wit, John Smith alone.” Nothing changed on the page – “I may have both times exactly the same sound upon my lips and the same picture in my mental eye” – but the distinction was nevertheless real and definable. “Mere noise” or articulated meaning – in each context the word “man” would have a fully “different feeling.” But James here extends the quite concrete feeling of mind that inhered transition between a shape and sign to the larger and more subtle understanding of the “sense” of a word writ large: man or mankind; John Smith, or all the world.

Thus, when James tells us that he wants to “re-instate the vague,” this is not (or at least not exactly) an expression of linguistic “vagueness” in the sense that it has usually been interpreted; it is not, in other words, a means of commending elusive expression or intricate phrasing. For James, rather, vagueness was a perfect definitely thing. It was a word that stood in for feelings that could not be named, but that were nevertheless observable and definable.

154 Fried, Realism, 82 (footnote). See also footnote on 87.
capacity opened up the possibility that the act of reading could be a site of real work. If a word could generate a material feeling in the mind, then reading offered James with an opportunity to shape the mind itself.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{156} Contemporary neuroscience has yet to precisely define such a “sense.” James’s problem becomes my own, then. If the effect I am describing inheres in the mute mental experience of each individual reader, then how can I claim to know its existence at all? From our perspective, in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, it seems presumptious to make a speculation across minds; the imagination of each of us is too personal. This has been at least one of the motives of recent work in the field of cognitive literary studies: if one could, perhaps, locate seemingly individual mental experiences in common brain function, then the experience could be opened up for literary analysis. Or to put it another (more personal) way: If James is correct about the mind’s “irradiations” then my argument can safely rest upon the shoulders of a “universal” mental mechanism.

And yet, I will argue, with James, that the science itself is of only secondary importance. As James wrote, in \textit{Pluralistic Universe}, “please don’t raise the question here of how these changes come to pass” (\textit{Pluralistic}, 753). The writers I am discussing in this dissertation shared an idea of a common mental apparatus; that idea, I have argued, changed in the late nineteenth century; that idea also gives us an indication of what these writers meant when they called attention to the materiality of their own text. The meaning of this attention only becomes apparent in the context of a larger understanding (correct or not) of the imagination as embodied – various in various ways, common in others. The imagination was wild, but only worked within certain fixed limits; the mind was unknowable, but its contours could be mapped.

Contemporary cognitive science may soon affirm that there is indeed a “slight sense of discomfort” when one stares at a word too long, located in the movement of irradiating neurons, associated with the pain centers of the brain, etc. But this fact would do nothing alone to explain the rhetorical purpose or meaning of this “feeling” in any given text. Fried’s own work provides a kind of case study. Though he understands the division of the sign to be in fact “primordial,” he does little to contextualize the meaning of that division and so misses its meaning altogether. William James, \textit{A Pluralistic Universe}, 1909, in \textit{Writings 1902-1910}, ed. Bruce Kuklick, 625-820 (New York: The Library of America, 1987).
“The ‘ghost’ at the Polytechnic.”

III. The Feeling of a Paradox

“Language works against our perception of the truth,” James writes, in *Principles*, and throughout his work James often poignantly apprised his reader of what Joan Richardson has described as “our condition of being locked in the prison-house of language.”157 “We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold,*” James writes. “Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses

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157 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 241; Richardson, *Natural History*, 8.
to lend itself to any other use.”

James mourns the necessity of using a language that will ever be inadequate to its task – a language doomed, in Poirier’s words, to “mediate and thus contaminate and redirect the stream’s flow.”

For Poirier, James’s call then would seem to be for a grammar amenable to “transitives and conjunctives, to fragments that decentralize any grammatical or ‘textual’ structure and that loosen the gravitational pull of substantives” – a grammar that “would make us aware that the relations between things are as important to experience as are the things themselves.” That is to say, a grammar like Henry James’s – one that valiantly (though perhaps impossibly) seeks to elude or evade the “prison-house” itself.

Indeed, it is Henry, not William, who has often been understood as the proper literary executor of William’s philosophy. As Joan Richardson suggests, though William in Principles had “pointed to the necessity” of a new kind of language – one that attended to “the in-between words and phrases where the facts of feeling are contained” – it was nevertheless left to Henry to begin “the actual experiments in this kind of language.” In his definitive account of the James brothers, Ross Posnock likewise credits William for his efforts to embrace the “flux” of life and experience. Yet while William set out “on a futile quest for fluency and transparency,” Posnock writes, Henry chose “the more difficult alternative, one that uses the material medium of language to represent the inner life’s thickness.”

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159 Poirier, Poetry, 130.
160 Ibid., 152.
161 Richardson, Natural History, 18.
163 Ibid.
In this respect, William’s general disinterest in (and at times pointed critique of) his brother’s style seems to be a curious blind spot in an otherwise capacious philosophy – an extension of his failure to fully face up to the stylistic entailments of his own work. Indeed, Henry’s writing would seem to precisely embody – and even at times anticipate – William’s philosophy; and yet, in a letter to Henry, written in 1907, William famously dismissed his brother’s late style:

Dearest H ... I’ve been so overwhelmed with work, and the mountain of the Unread has piled up so, that only in these days ... have I been able to settle down to your “Scene in America,” [American Scene] which in its peculiar way seems to me supremely great. You know how opposed your whole ‘third manner’ of execution is to the literary ideals which animate my crude and Orson-like breast, mine being to say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then to drop it forever; yours being to avoid naming it straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn’t!) the illusion of a solid object, made (like the ‘ghost’ at the Polytechnic) wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space. But you do it, that’s the queerness! And the complication of innuendo and associative reference on the enormous scale to which you give way to it does so build out the matter for the reader that the result is to solidify, by the mere bulk of the process, the like perception from which he has to start. As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh like a corporeal body; so his own poor little initial perception, swathed in this gigantic envelopment of suggestive atmosphere, grows like a germ into something vastly bigger and more substantial. But it’s the rummest method! – for one to employ systematically as you do nowadays; and you employ it at your peril. In this crowded and hurried reading age, pages that require such close attention remain unread and neglected. You can’t skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. The method seems perverse: ‘Say it out, for God’s sake,’ they cry, ‘and have done with it.’ And so I say now, give us one thing in your older directer manner, just to show that, in spite of your paradoxical success in this unheard-of method, you can still
write according to accepted canons. Give us that interlude; then continue like the ‘curiosity of literature’ which you have become. For gleams and innuendoes and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable, but the core of literature is solid. Give it to us once again! The bare perfume of things will not support existence, and the effect of solidarity you reach is but perfume and simulacrum.

For God’s sake don’t answer these remarks, which (as Uncle Howard used to say of Father’s writings) are but the peristaltic belchings of my own crabbed organism. For one thing, your account of America is largely one of its omissions, silences, vacancies. You work them up like solids, for those readers who already germinally perceive them (to others you are totally incomprehensible). 164

He closed with an apology (“Forgive! forgive!”) and a reminder: “I have just finisht the proofs of a little book called ‘Pragmatism’ which even you may enjoy reading.” 165

William here quite precisely defines the difference between his brother’s style and his own – one “vague,” one “clear.” “For gleams and innuendoes and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable,” William writes. Though his condescension is apparent, the question has long been why William himself did not include more of these “gleams and innuendoes” in his own writing. As more than one commentator has noted, William here plays the unflattering part of the sniping (and somewhat threatened) older brother. William, obsessed with the “accepted canons,” concerned with this “hurried reading age,” shows no faith that Henry James’s great, sustained language experiments will amount to more than a “curiosity of literature.”

But a closer reading of this letter suggests that William’s objections are not merely reducible to sibling rivalry, misunderstanding, or a philistine appeal to the 19 of 20 readers

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165 Ibid.
(though they may also of course include all three). Rather, I would argue, the letter includes a fully articulated philosophy of writing – a kind of negative of Henry’s own – animated by similar aims, but executed in an entirely “other” manner.

Henry, William notes, had taken up the task of creating an “illusion of a solid object” through a series of literary devices that William likens to those that produced the “‘ghost’ at the Polytechnic” – “wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space.” But, William points out, such an illusion is only possible for the “reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn’t!).” William articulates this concern no less than three times over the course of the letter. Indeed, as William repeats throughout the passage, for Henry to produce such an “illusion” at all, he can only build upon the reader’s “like perception from which he has to start.” Without this “poor little initial perception” the effect will be lost. Thus, if Henry is able to take the “omissions” of the American scene and “work them up like solids” it is only “for those readers who already germinally perceive them.” As William emphasizes, “to others you are totally incomprehensible.”

James here describes a problem of experience – which is to say, a problem of imagination. When James abridged Principles, he began his chapter on Imagination by speaking of Galton – but also of the blind and deaf. “The blind may dream of sights, the deaf of sounds, for years after they have lost their vision or hearing,” James wrote. “But the man born deaf can never be made to imagine what sound is like, nor can the man born blind ever have a mental vision.”\footnote{James, Principles, vol. 2, 44.} For James, these perceptual experiences thus represented what Locke called the
“‘boundaries of our thoughts.’”\footnote{Ibid., 6.} As James pointed out, “mental vision” was limited by perceptual experience: one could not \textit{imagine} the color blue, the taste of a pear, or the sensation of light if one had never been “touched” by the perception before. James called this “dumb knowledge of acquaintance” – “dumb” because it was a kind of experience that “no book-learning can replace.”\footnote{James, \textit{Briefer}, 22.} The man “\textit{born} blind” could perhaps know \textit{about} light (“reflection, refraction, the spectrum, the ether-theory, etc.”) – and could even discuss it knowledgably. But direct knowledge \textit{of} light was impossible to convey in words.\footnote{James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 4.} Once one had seen color – even once – one could, as James put it, “build out” from the “germ” of experience. But without this originary “germ,” one’s knowledge would ever remain in the realm of abstraction, like that of a blind man who has “not felt the blueness”: “hollow and inadequate.”\footnote{Ibid., 7.}

“Experience,” James wrote, “leaves its ‘unimaginable touch’ on the matter of the convolutions” of an infant’s mind.\footnote{Ibid., 8.} For James, I will argue, the problem of producing a material “touch” on the mind of his reader became a key task of writing. In its original context, the phrase, taken from Wordsworth, was a poetic reference to the effects of time’s passage.\footnote{James uses the same phrase in \textit{Varieties}. It is from Wordsworth’s “Mutability,” a sonnet published in 1822: From low to high doth dissolution climb, And sink from high to low, along a scale Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail: A musical but melancholy chime, Which they can hear who meddle not with crime, Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care. Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear The longest date do melt like frosty rime, That in the morning whitened hill and plain And is no more; drop like the tower sublime Of yesterday, which royally did wear His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain.
What was metaphorical in Wordsworth, however, becomes quite literal in James’s rewriting – a “touch” that shapes the mind’s “matter,” its material “convolutions.” And yet, though James here converts poetry into psychology, James’s effort will be no different than Wordsworth’s: to “touch” the imagination of his reader.

“Your methods & my ideals seem the reverse, the one of the other,” William wrote to Henry, responding to another of his works, in this case, *The Golden Bowl*. Though William can often be heard to lament the limits of language, for him, I would argue, language was not a prison, and the body was not a trap. While William at times seems to move to evade the binding ties of grammar and syntax, more often, I would suggest, he works *at* and *upon* those limits – limits discretely defined by the link between mind and body. For James, a psychologist, the aim was neither to escape the structure of language, nor to change it, but rather to exploit its immutable and fixed bounds.

Thus while his brother perhaps seemed to want to produce the “illusion” of a solid object, William, I will argue, saw his work as one of producing objects themselves, by way of assuring – rather than hoping – that the reader had a “similar perception.”

Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

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173 William James to Henry James, October 22, 1905, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 3: William and Henry, 1897-1910, eds. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley with the assistance of Bernice Grohskopf and Wilma Bradbeer (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992-2004), InteLex Past Masters, http://library.nlx.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/xtf/view?docId=jamesw_c/jamesw_c.03.xml;chunk.id=william.james.v3.d011k;brand=default (accessed February 23, 2011). It should be said that James did express somewhat shocking disdain for his brother’s “third manner,” and recommended that he write something “with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style.” Much as I would like to credit William here (and I do think we are missing something), he ever remains a somewhat sniping older brother.

174 Joan Richardson has attributed James’s stylistic conservatism to his own psychological history – his well-known experience with chronic neurasthenia. James’s respect for the “ingrained habits of his audiences,” she suggests, followed from “having himself experienced the breakdown resulting from overloading neuronal circuitry with too much new and incompatible information” (*Natural History*, 131). As I have argued, however, James drew upon a series of literary effects derived from the certainty that we share “neuronal” capacities – and the *certain* “overloading” that results from processing “incompatible information.”
reach is but perfume and simulacrum,” William writes. If it is a “solid” that William wants, it will be the real thing, rather than its mere “effect.” To do so, he would deploy a technique familiar to us from Gilman’s work, and as we shall see, Keller’s as well – writers similarly driven by new theories of imagination to produce objects of experience, rather than illusions of them.

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“What shall we call a THING anyhow?” James asks, in *Pragmatism* (1907). Here, James included a diagram, familiar to us from *Principles*.

![Figure 4. From William James, *Pragmatism* (1907).](image)

In *Principles*, James had used the star to demonstrate the role of the imagination in creating perceptual experience. As Helmholtz wrote, “we must form as clear a notion as possible of what we expect to see. Then it will actually appear.” With the proper “mental duplicate,” a “star” could become a “hexagon”; “French” could become English; a stranger’s bonnet could become a

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176 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 441.
lover’s. As we have seen, the suggestion that the imagination could “pass over into the sensation-process” could be understood as destabilizing – indeed, a woman might appear in the wallpaper.\footnote{James, Principles, vol. 2, 72.} But for James, the fact that a lively mental image could in some way perceptibly \textit{make} its own reality, suggested that it was a paradigm for understanding experience as such.

Thus, in \textit{Pragmatism}, James drew upon the six-pointed star – the unstable image – in order to assert that it was “impossible” to “separate the real from the human factors in the growth of our cognitive experience.”\footnote{James, Pragmatism, 596.} “Let this stand as a first brief indication of the humanistic position. Does it seem paradoxical?” he asks. “If so, I will try to make it plausible by a few illustrations, which will lead to a fuller acquaintance with the subject.”\footnote{Ibid.}

In many familiar objects everyone will recognize the human element. … You can take a chessboard as black squares on a white ground, or as white squares on a black ground, and neither conception is a false one. You can treat the adjoined figure as a star, as two big triangles crossing each other, as a hexagon with legs set up on its angles, as six equal triangles hanging together by their tips, etc. All these treatments are true treatments – the sensible \textit{that} upon the paper resists no one of them.\footnote{Ibid., 596-7.}

“We break the flux of sensible reality into things, then, at our will” James writes – an operation one could perform directly, in the appended figure.\footnote{Ibid., 598.} For James, the task of shuttling between the “black squares on a white ground” and the reverse; between the “two big triangles” and “a hexagon”; demonstrated directly the way that \textit{all} objects were “cut” from the “flux of sensible reality” – “selected” from the field of our own perception. Indeed, the small task of moving

\begin{footnotes}
\item[177] James, \textit{Principles}, vol. 2, 72.
\item[178] James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 596.
\item[179] Ibid.
\item[180] Ibid., 596-7.
\item[181] Ibid., 598.
\end{footnotes}
between aspects of the figured star was no different than the operation by which we understood *real* stars – and the universe:

We carve out groups of stars in the heavens, and call them constellations, and the stars patiently suffer us to do so – tho if they knew what we were doing, some of them might feel much surprised at the partners we had given them. We name the same constellation diversely, as Charles’s Wain, the Great Bear, or the Dipper. None of the names will be false, and one will be as true as another, for all are applicable.\(^{182}\)

One might shuttle between groupings of dots on a page, or create a grouping of “dots” in the sky – a constellation. The task in either case was precisely the same. The mind operated upon the figure in the margin just as it operated upon the undifferentiated “field of sensation” presented to us at every moment: “by our emphasis we mark its foreground and its background; by our order we read it in this direction or in that. We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves.”\(^{183}\)

As in *Principles*, James asserted that the six-pointed star would be a “familiar object” to his reader. Here “everyone will recognize the human element,” he said. And yet, though “everyone” might recognize it, James nevertheless took care to provide the diagram itself. By moving through different perceptions of the “adjoined figure,” the reader could make “a fuller acquaintance with the subject.” Indeed the reader would *have* to make “acquaintance” with this insight in order to know it at all. Here, as in the case of all unstable images, one would have to make the experiment in order to understand the effect.\(^{184}\) A triangle could be cut from a six-

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\(^{182}\) Ibid., 597.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 594.

\(^{184}\) The potential for any of these examples to fail was inherent to the observation. When first regarding the figured boxes, it might be difficult to shuttle between the two “aspects” of the figure; likewise, James argued, the “identity” of the English phrase (masquerading as French) might be easily missed. Without James’s explicit instruction, it was perfectly possible that some would never perceive the duality of the boxes at all. Indeed, in some cases even James’s direction might not be sufficient for the described transformation to actually be experienced.
pointed star; a “French” phrase could become English; a box could move from convex to concave – but these changes could only be perceived first-hand. As Joseph Jastrow noted, “the effect of looking at the figure as a pattern in black upon a white background, or as a pattern in white upon a black background is quite different, although the difference is not easily described.” You can take a chessboard as black squares on a white ground, or as white squares on a black ground,” James wrote, but the distinction could not be explained – it could only be witnessed.

As with all first-hand experience, however, once witnessed, the knowledge was permanent and abiding. When first regarding a hollow box, for example, it might be difficult to shuttle between the two “aspects” of the figure; likewise, James argued, the “identity” of the English phrase (masquerading as French) might be easily missed. But once “resolved,” it was possible to “attend to it again whenever we like, on account of the mental duplicate of it which

James here footnoted another “puzzle” for the reader – a “French” sentence that would resolve into English once read aloud. The sentence, “Gui n’a beau dit, qui sabot dit, nid a beau dit elle?” emerged as the English phrase: “Gin a body kiss a body need a body tell.” In this case however, James did not include the “solution” – a seeming challenge to the reader. (I myself had to research the answer.) The English phrase, which was unfamiliar to me, comes from a once-popular children’s song – a poem by Robert Burns set to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne.” In puzzling over these lines myself, I felt very keenly the rustiness of my own French (was my accent correct?); in discovering the answer, I felt very keenly the changes in what might be considered “common” language. What was once a familiar “catch,” as James put it, may remain familiar to some – but it was new to me; the transformation of nonsense French into near-nonsense English (unfamiliar poetry written in Scot’s dialect) did not produce the desired “effect” on this reader.

This is perhaps why James multiplies the analogy – as he puts it, by way of “illustration.” The diagrams in Principles produce an effect of the same order as a French-English “puzzle,” the same as the hearing of a “longed-for or dreaded sound,” or any one of a cascading number of examples: The unstable figures are like a chime in the night are like a hunter searching for game are like a criminal’s paranoia are like a lover’s search for a bonnet in the street. In extending the analogy, James also extends the possibility that the reader will experience a moment of recognition; that is to say, the possibility that he or she will “identify” with one of the described examples. James’s discussion here indeed demands such “identification” – or rather, experience.

One of the characteristic stylistic features of this kind of writing, I would argue, is its tendency to repeat itself, to list, to gang up examples. One need only consider “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story that, in only 20 pages, manages to be extremely tediously repetitive. It means that a story might be very short (why continue once the effect has been achieved?). Or, it might mean that a story might be very long – as in Puddin’head Wilson, which just goes on and on; it has no ending, because I would argue, it doesn’t need one.

Italics mine. Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 283.
our imagination now bears.”

Having perceived the change once, it was possible to make the transition at will. Until then, however, the reader’s understanding of the difference would remain merely descriptive – “hollow and inadequate.” Indeed, for a reader who had not felt the change that James described – who had not “felt the blueness” so to speak – James’s point was utterly lost. His meaning depended upon “acquaintance” – without it, it was hard to say if one knew at all what he meant by “reality” – or even, indeed, what he meant by “objects.”

“The humanist view of ‘reality,’ as something resisting yet malleable, which controls our thinking as an energy that must be taken ‘account’ of incessantly (tho not necessarily merely copied) is evidently a difficult one to introduce to novices,” James writes. James could lecture at length on the nature of reality, and of objects, but the only evidence he could present for this assertion would be in the observation of its operation in oneself. The inserted “illustration” in this case thus served a vital purpose. Though James could of course hope that the reader was “familiar” with this operation, by including a diagram, he could ensure that his reader would have this experience – right then and there, in the midst of the lecture, or in the margin of the page. The experiment could be made, the experience had, the trouble passed. James thus used the appended figure to demonstrate what could not otherwise be told. The truth of James’s view was borne out in the reader’s own experience, in real-time – an effect of a series of marks drawn upon the page. Here, in the margin, one received visceral instruction – a small demonstration – of how all of reality was constructed, “cut” from the chaos. Here, in the margin, James provided the reader with a “germ” of experience itself.

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186 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 442.

187 James, *Pragmatism*, 599-600.
In *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908), James famously lamented the limits of language, talking, words. “I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk,” he writes.  

I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what I say at the same time exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. … I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves.

James sought to inform his reader about the world – reality, experience – but much of what he needed to say was simply not sayable. Certainly when it came to discussing “dumb” experience it could not be described. James had wanted to convey an experience to his reader, perhaps, but in order to do so, he had had to insert a star, an object, a diagram – a mere *that* – into his text; something, in other words, to *point* to.

James could not of course include diagrams at every turn in his argument. But he often did include another “illustration” in his writing, one that might help produce a “germ” of experience for the reader who had not already had a “similar perception.” As we have seen, the unstable image was not the only kind of object that exhibited perceptual instability. The same changes apparent in the star were, James asserted, apparent in “any word on this page.” For James, the mute, but *felt* distinctions inherent in a simple six-pointed star provided a demonstration the way in which whole constellations were carved; likewise, we shall see, James drew upon the mute, but *felt* distinction between a shape and a sign in order to demonstrate the

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188 James, *Pluralistic*, 762.
189 Ibid.
way in which all sense was made. Thus, while James surely did lament the use of language as a tool for dissecting experience, language nevertheless provided James with a site of instruction in what experience was.

Indeed, the thing that James “pointed to” most often was his own scene of writing and the reader’s scene of reading. Thus, for example, in “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” (1884), James asks the reader to try to identify the thought-images produced by a given sentence. Though presumably the experiment could be done with any sentence, the particular sentence James chooses is “I write with steel pens” – a seeming reference to the task he happens to be undertaking at that very moment.190 Or, to take only one instance from Principles, James explains his understanding of “concrete fact” with reference to the paper that is presently before him (and us): “Now that I am writing, it is essential that I conceive my paper as a surface for inscription. If I failed to do that, I should have to stop my work.”191 Here again, James might have chosen any perceptual object as an example – and yet he chooses “my paper.” Likewise, in his later essay, “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing” (1905), the object he chooses is “this ‘pen’” – the one he was presumably writing with at that instant.192 Similarly, in “A World of Pure Experience” (1904), he reminds the reader that his own experience (at the very time of his writing) consists of the task of writing itself: “While still pure, or present, any experience – mine, for example, of what I write about in these very lines – passes for ‘truth.”’193 Or, again, in “Does Consciousness Exist” (1904), James suggests that the reader make an experiment with the book that (must be) in his or her hands: “Let him [the reader] begin with a

190 James, “Omissions,” 1009.
193 James, “World,” 1175.
perceptual experience, the ‘presentation,’ so called, of a physical object, his actual field of
vision, the room he sits in, with the book he is reading as its centre.**194

In Stephen Meyer’s account, this last passage produces a “Pandora’s box of self-
reflexivity”; and each of these moments can be said to present the interpretive “paradox” that
Fried identifies. Indeed, though Fried worries over the reader’s latent attention to “the written
words themselves, the white, lined sheet of paper on which they were inscribed, the marks made
by his pen on the surface of the sheet,” he hardly notes that James at times quite explicitly
prompts the reader to take this turn.195 Thus, for example, in an 1895 essay, James suggested that
his reader make an experiment with “the white of the paper before our eyes.”196 When the reader
stared at the page, James wrote, “the paper is in the mind and the mind is around the paper.”197

“Dotted all through our experience are states of immediate acquaintance just like this,” James
wrote. “Somewhere our belief always does rest on ultimate data like the whiteness, smoothness,
or squareness of this paper” – the paper of course directly in front of us right now.198

Fried, like Meyer, thus understands this to be a fundamentally failed – and even sharply
threatening – literary strategy. As both critics note, the attempt to make the page the site of
meeting produces an irresolvable interpretive impasse – an end to reading. James’s attention to

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194 James, “Does Consciousness Exist,” 1145.
195 Fried, Realism, 119.
196 James, “Tigers,” 854.
197 Ibid., 856.
198 Ibid., 855. Notably, only in his essays does he talk about pens and paper and books, etc.; the references are
largely missing in his lectures. When James is speaking he employs a modified version of the same technique,
calling attention to the audience’s act of listening at that very moment. Thus, in Pluralistic Universe: “… the actual
cannot be impossible, and what is actual at every moment of our lives is the sort of thing which I now proceed to
remind you of. … The absurdity charged is that the self-same should function so differently, now with and now
without something else. But this it sensibly seems to do. This very desk which I strike with my hand strikes in turn
your eyes” (Pluralistic, 753). Or, in Pragmatism: “What shall we call a Thing anyhow? It seems quite arbitrary, for
we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes. For me, this whole
‘audience’ is one thing, which grows now restless, now attentive. I have no use at present for its individual units, so
I don’t consider them. So of an ‘army,’ of a ‘nation.’ But in your own eyes, ladies and gentlemen, to call you
‘audience’ is an accidental way of taking you” (Pragmatism, 597).
the page, then, would seem to represent an unconscious concern about the possibility that his own “thoughts” might become mere “things.” James here reduces his text to a sheet of paper – white, smooth and square; should the reader in fact perform the suggested experiment, the page would effectively become unreadable – a mere “sensible that” in the hands. For the text to be paper, it would no longer be a text.

And yet, it was precisely this interpretive instability that James sought to emphasize. “Does the river make its banks, or do the banks make the river? Does a man walk with his right leg or with his left leg more essentially?” James asks, in Pragmatism.\(^{199}\) “Let this stand as a first brief indication of the humanistic position. Does it seem paradoxical?\(^{200}\) “The humanistic position” had a “paradox” at its heart; James drew upon the “paradox” inherent in the unstable image in order to evidence a fact that could not be fully verbalized, but that was nevertheless observably true. If an attention to the page of reading – while reading – likewise created a kind of paradox, James drew upon the predictable form of that paradox in order to instruct the reader in the paradox central to the “humanist view of ‘reality.’”\(^{201}\)

With the six-pointed star, James had demonstrated that our thoughts were indistinguishable from the things they perceived; in this case, James drew upon the perceptual

\(^{199}\) James, Pragmatism, 596.

\(^{200}\) Ibid.

\(^{201}\) Ibid., 599. The extended description of “selective imagination” or “selective attention” that we find in James, Sully and Jastrow is, in their account, a process of choosing between more and less significant details. The process by which one perceives faces in a fire is, fundamentally, a choice between foreground and background; as James here points out, that choice is inherent in our perception of reality itself. Barthes’s description of the “reality effect” seems relevant here: For Barthes, the “reality effect” in literature is likewise a matter of choosing between more and less relevant details. That is to say, the writer includes a “background” of somewhat irrelevant details upon which the “foreground” of meaning can emerge.

In this sense, we can consider James’s attention to the materiality of the sign to be a different kind of “reality effect” – though in an entirely different register. James does here intend to give the reader an experience of the “real”; and he does it with a technique that works by the logic of “foreground” and “background.”

As in all of my discussion, the “realism” I am describing here is not a matter of narrative or plot; that is to say, if there is “realism” here it will not happen in the horizontal line of the sentence, the paragraph, the book. It happens entirely outside of the book, in fact, on the axis between the reader and the page.
instability of the paper-in-your-hands in order to illustrate that things could in fact become thoughts. Indeed, the feeling of the paper “in the mind” and the mind “around the paper,” James argued, demonstrated that “thought-stuff” and “thing-stuff” were fundamentally the same material.202 James here included a diagram, similar to those in Principles:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 5.** From William James, “The Tigers in India” (1895).

As in the case of the six-pointed star or the hollow boxes, James argued, the paper took part in two incompatible, mutually exclusive “systems” at the same time. The paper could be understood alone, as mere paper – with its qualities of “whiteness, smoothness, or squareness”; or, to the contrary, it could be taken with its “context of associates” – the site of reading, meaning and thought. The box was both convex and concave, the star could be described as a hexagon and as many triangles; the paper could be both thing and thought – neither description was false.

As Fried quite rightly notes, the task of rendering a living word into a dead “glass eye” marks an end to reading; for James, too, a word in its “sensational nudity” is no longer really a word at all, but a shape. Likewise, here, in order to take the paper as mere paper one must, at least momentarily, end one’s reading. But the interruption was the crucial point. One might at

202 James, “Tigers,” 854.
first find it difficult to shuttle between aspects of a hollow box; once the change was made, however, the effect could be repeated at will. Part of the pleasure – and point – of these illusions was their repetitive, recursive nature. James’s suggestion that the reader take “any word on this page,” was of the same quality. The trick was repeatable; if the word were momentarily rendered dead “body,” its “soul” would soon be restored.

This is perhaps why the predicted stylistic effects never quite materialize in James – because they are occurring on another axis. As Poirier has written, James was deeply interested in the “transitive” – in “whatever moves things from static positions.” As the movement that James commends is not exclusively a quality of those “in between words.” Indeed, the “relation” James calls upon is often not the one between words in a sentence, but rather, between the reader and the page. As in the case of the six-pointed star, the sensible that on the page never moved; the change, such as it was observable at all, was made in oneself. The transformation that James invokes here does not occur on the axis of the line – or to use Richardson’s description, within “individual sentence boundaries.” Indeed, to perform the task of taking the paper as paper, living word as dead, grammar and syntax must at some point be abandoned altogether – one must, even for the barest moment, stare at the page, your own eye now “glass.”

But to stop reading means also to take it up again. And in the transition could be found a paradigm of experience itself. “When we talk of reality ‘independent’ of human thinking, then, it

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203 Poirier, Poetry, 151.

204 As Dewey reminds us in Quest for Certainty, the distinction between mind and body was also a distinction that implicated the nature of objects. As Dewey points out, the separation between mind and body suggested that “we are doubtful, puzzled, confused, undecided; objects are complete, assured, fixed” (Quest, 231). As both James and Dewey emphasized however, the objects themselves were not “fixed,” but could also be understood as “doubtful, puzzled” and “undecided.” At the moment when one shifted between aspects, the object was shown not as “complete, assured, fixed,” but instead reflected the “puzzle” of our own mind.

205 Richardson, Natural History, 131.
seems a thing very hard to find,” James writes, in *Pragmatism*.

“It is what is absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds.” Indeed, a pre-existing bare *that* of sensible reality, the kind that preceded all thinking, or cognizing, or cutting-up-of-it was nearly unavailable to the adult person. “*Pure sensations can only be realized in the earliest days of life,*” James writes, in *Principles*. “The first sensation which an infant gets is for him the Universe “– but the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” presented to a newborn was almost immediately shaped by “memories and stores of associations acquired.” And yet, though difficult to come by, there were nevertheless moments when one could “glimpse” this original state, if only fleetingly. When the reader considered his or her “private vision” of the “white paper before our eyes,” the paper, James wrote, could be taken “as if it constituted by itself the universe (and it might perfectly well do so, for aught we can understand to the contrary).” At this instant, the reader had a momentary return to the “first sensation” – one that preceded a “human touch.” For an instant, one felt the “dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds.”

One cannot keep the paper *as* mere paper forever; it stubbornly returns to “life”; but in the transition one could watch meaning being made. By ending reading – and beginning again – one could also, briefly, spy the mind’s mechanism in action. In this moment, one could observe a material *thing* (a shape, a paper) become a *thought* (a word, a page) – an utterly mysterious transformation, but an observable one nevertheless. As James explained, in

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206 James, *Pragmatism*, 595.
207 Ibid.
208 James, *Principles*, vol. 2, 7.
209 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 488.
210 James, “Tigers,” 854; 855.
Principles, the distinction between aspects of a word marked the very distinction between feeling and thought itself:

We can relapse at will into a mere condition of acquaintance with an object by scattering our attention and staring at it in a vacuous trance-like way. We can ascend to knowledge about it by rallying our wits and proceeding to notice and analyze and think. … The words feeling and thought give voice to the antithesis. Through feelings we become acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them. Feelings are the germ and starting point of cognition, thoughts the developed tree.211

In the task of “vacuous trance-like” “staring” at a word or the page, one had a momentary encounter with mere sensation – and then, only fleetingly. At this moment, though, the reader could watch the “germ” of feeling become a “developed tree.” To make a word dead and alive; to interrupt reading and then take it up again; to render the paper mere paper, and then read the paper; to take “any word on this page,” was to observe the mechanism of cognition itself. To watch reading happen is, after all, to watch sense being made.

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“Attempts to shape reality in language may be, from a literary point of view, dazzlingly successful, but they are always to some degree a betrayal of that reality,” Poirier writes.212

For Poirier, this necessary “betrayal” suggests the limits of James’s project:

There is at the very heart of the Emersonian pragmatist enterprise with language, and in its concept of work, a compulsion to evade the fact (as I take it to be) that the work with language which they recommend and exemplify is so special a discipline that it can legitimately hope, despite James’s gusto, to have only an indirect and minimal effect on

211 James, Principles, vol. 1, 222.
212 Poirier, Poetry, 27.
existing realities, and can probably have little effect at all on the nature of work done beyond the study or on the page. Emersonian pragmatism … can claim social or communal efficacy only by to some extent cheating on itself.”

For Poirier, James’s project in the end can only be, in some sense, merely literary. “As I see it,” Poirier writes, James “offers here a prescription and a promise only for the writing of poetry and prose. And while these may on occasion change the perception of reality by a particular reader, James’s rhetoric, like Emerson’s, is obviously hinting at more consequential rewards.”

And yet, I would argue, James’s “gusto” is not unwarranted. James wrote of steel pens and white paper; of the book in his hand, and in the reader’s own; of the desk he was writing at, and the room the reader was sitting in. At these moments, James undertakes what Poirier would describe as an impossible task: to literally “shape reality in language.” Though words could not adequately describe the “humanist view of ‘reality,’” they were, for James, the object that most readily demonstrated the quality of the “human touch.” The words do not serve to represent reality at these moments, and so do not “betray” it. Rather, James takes the words themselves to be what they are – bits of reality, objects that one might (and must) operate upon. In calling attention to the act of reading, James, sought to inform his readers about the ways in which reality itself was crafted; the way in which facts were shaped; the ways in which we cut from the “flux.” The experience was not one that could be described – only observed, first-hand, in oneself.

In his letter to his brother, William worried that Henry had not provided the reader with a “poor little initial perception” – “Heaven help him if he hasn’t!” James, I have argued, attempted to provide – even to ensure – this “poor little initial perception” throughout his work, and so to

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213 Poirier, Poetry, 94-95.
214 Ibid., 131.
provide a “touch” of his own upon the mind of the reader. Indeed, it happens in the very first pages of *Principles*. Here, James lays out the project of the book. For his “data,” he would take “thoughts and feelings,” as well as the “physical world in time and space with which they coexist.”215 The first data point was one we could procure ourselves:

The ideas and feelings, e.g., which these present printed characters excite in the reader’s mind not only occasion movements of his eyes and nascent movements of articulation in him, but will some day make him speak, or take sides in a discussion, or give advice, or choose a book to read, differently from what would have been the case had they never impressed his retina. Our psychology must therefore take account not only of the conditions antecedent to mental states, but of their resultant consequences as well.216 As we have seen, the example was one that James turned to throughout his work – that of a “retina” following over a set of “printed characters.” Here, over the course of a single sentence, James describes a transformation of the physical into the mental. The words on the page (the “present printed characters”) lead first to the movements of the reader’s eyes, then to the often unnoticed movement of the tongue and lips that happens as one silently reads a set of words (the “nascent movements of articulation in him”). These physiological responses prefigure the obscure future moment when, through some chain of unknown and unknowable association, these words “will make him speak.” The phrase serves as a hinge in the sentence, seeming first to be of a piece with those mechanical, nerve-driven “movements of articulation” but immediately moving into the mental realm of intellect and emotion — the kind of act that leads one to “take sides in a discussion.” In this way, the “feelings” that the words might “excite” begin as a literal physical response – sensory information “impressed” upon the retina – but are

\[215\text{ James, *Principles*, vol. 1, vi.}\]
\[216\text{ Ibid., 5. “The whole remainder of the book,” he wrote, “will be more or less of a proof “ that this postulate was valid (Ibid., 4).}\]
rhetorically transformed into the kind of elusive, abstract “feeling” that might lead the reader to “give advice, or choose a book to read.”

But James does not simply describe the process of reading here – one with which we all must be familiar. Rather, he takes pains to indicate the “present printed characters” – these very words on the page here. The moment is made present for the reader, who must become conscious of those “characters” – and of the very act of reading. The shift between the literal and the metaphorical – one that happens descriptively, figuratively, over the course of the sentence – is thus mirrored by the actual real-time transformation of the literal “printed characters” into the articulated meaning we ascribe them. The strange feeling of the mind at this moment – reading here and imagining the future at the same time, aware of one’s own body and mind and also of the fact of reading while reading – provides a demonstration of the very principle that James seeks to explain: “no mental modification ever occurs which is not accompanied or followed by a bodily change.”

And yet, there is a third a register as well. In this attention to the page, the reader also becomes conscious of the significance of the words – not only in the sense of their intended meaning, but in the sense of their potentially determinant role in his or her own future actions. James informs us that these characters “will some day” make the reader “speak, or take sides in a discussion, or give advice, or choose a book to read, differently from what would have been the case had they never impressed his retina.” How will these words that I am about to read (that I am reading now) obscurely affect my eye, my brain, my thought, my actions? James asks. The question is not rhetorical. Though we cannot know precisely how these “present characters” may later alter our experience James asserts that they certainly, in some way, will. Here, then, we

217 James, Principles, vol. 1, 5.
watch “sense” being made, but in the process James suggests that we are also watching our own future being crafted as well. Here, right now, as you read this, you are growing different, he says. Here we witness the narrowest possible slice of becoming.

“Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to ourselves to make ourselves and grow, are the parts of the world to which we are the closest, the parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete” James writes, in *Pragmatism*.

Why should we not take them at their face-value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world – why not the workshop of being, where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other kind of way than this?218

For James, the place in which “we catch fact in the making” was also the place in which the world was made: “the workshop of being.” Here, in the first pages of *Principles*, James asks his readers to watch sense emerge: to watch things become thoughts, to watch thoughts become things – that is to say, to “catch fact” at its very instantiation in the mind. Here we watch the “germ of cognition” transform into the “developed tree.” We transform a sensible *that* into something sensibly other. And in these brief encounters, James suggests, we feel and thus come to *know* what a “turning-place” of experience might mean. At such moments – in fact, at every moment of reading – James, suggests, we are presented with a paradigm of the “workshop of being” itself. Nothing changes on the page – the “present printed characters” were the same for James as they will be for you and the next reader – and yet, the change is effected nevertheless. To watch a series of marks – the dead “body” of these words – become a living soul, James suggests, is also to watch our own being “in the making” as well.

218 James, *Pragmatism*, 613.
In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James reprinted two of the extraordinary accounts he had gathered in his own breakfast-table survey—“extracts from two cases near the ends of the scale.”\(^1\) As we have seen, James’s “poor visualizer” represented one of these extremes: a man who reported that he could only perceive the “‘faintest impressions’” of images in his mind—and even these as if “‘through a thick fog.’”\(^2\) Alongside this however, James also presented the account of an exceptionally “good visualizer,” drawn again from his own inquiry. In striking contrast to the first respondent, the man reported that his image of the morning’s breakfast table was “‘perfectly clear and bright.’”\(^3\) Color, he said, was especially vivid: “‘if, for example, I were to recall a plate decorated with flowers I could reproduce in a drawing the exact tone, etc.’”\(^4\) Perhaps most striking though, the respondent claimed that he could literally re-picture a full page of text, should he be asked to recall it. Indeed, when reciting poetry, he said, he would simply read the lines from the text “printed” in his mind—just as one would with a physical page:

‘Even before I can recite the lines I see them so that I could give them very slowly word for word, but my mind is so occupied in looking at my printed image that I have no idea of what I am saying, of the sense of it, etc. When I first found myself doing this I used to

\(^2\) Ibid., 57.
\(^3\) Ibid., 56.
\(^4\) Ibid.
think it was merely because I knew the lines imperfectly; but I have quite convinced myself that I really do see an image.'  

Though he acknowledged that this was a difficult claim to verify, he nevertheless offered James a compelling demonstration: ""The strongest proof that such is really the fact is, I think, the following,"' he said. ""I can look down the mentally seen page and see the words that commence all the lines, and from any one of these words I can continue the line."' As an example, he wrote the first words of each line of one of Jean de la Fontaine’s "Fables"; James reproduced the series for his own reader, precisely as the respondent had done, complete with typographic indentation and citation:

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Étant fait . . . .
Tous . . . .
A des . . . .
Que fit . . . .
Céres . . . .
   Avec . . . .
 Un fleur . . . .
    Comme . . . .
(La Fontaine 8, iv.)
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The task of recalling the text was, the man said, ""much easier to do if the words begin in a straight line than if there are breaks."" The respondent’s emphasis on the indentations – on the
look of the page, a leaf torn from the binding – served as proof of the fact that, as he said, “‘I really do see an image.’” A simple recitation of the poem would have proven only that the man “knew” the poem – that is to say, recalled it. The text’s fragmentation – the position of the words, severed from their lines – made it possible to understand the lines as a reproduction of a mental image.

But the status of such a “text” – rendered as an “image” – is called into question by the example. In James’s account, the fragmented poem becomes a literal “illustration” of the respondent’s mental capacity; and the words here, I would argue, serve a purpose far more like that of an inserted picture than that of a text. (Figure 1.) In this sense, the broken poem, as it appears in James’s account, is not written, but more accurately described as traced, transcribed or drawn – an icon of La Fontaine’s original. Indeed, it is unclear whether the lines are even meant to be read. As written, the series of isolated words – many of which are conjunctive and transitional – is nonsensical. The words direct us not to their referents, but to the absent poem, against which they may be tested, as proof of the respondent’s claims. James leaves the text untranslated, as the translation that has properly occurred is in the man’s reproduction of the lines; the original, filtered through the respondent’s mind, emerges on the other side. If the poem has a meaning, then, it is not to be found in the words’ content, but in the faithfulness of their reproduction.

And yet, questions immediately arise. In the first edition of Principles, the word “Cérès” appears without its second accent mark (as I have reproduced it above). Is this a typographic error in James’s work, sustained through multiple editions? Or is it James’s faithful transcription of the man’s account? If so, is it possible that the man miscopied from his own mental image?

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8 Ibid.
Or perhaps the failure is in the image itself – a faulty mental “copy” of the original page? Perhaps, ultimately, the typographic error appeared in the man’s own book of poetry – now preserved in James’s own. James includes the citation (one which the respondent himself provided) presumably to help with the act of verification. But the process of checking the man’s reproduced lines against their putative “source” only produces regressions of interpretive uncertainty.

Still, though these errors in some sense distort the text as such, they nevertheless support the larger meaning of the demonstration. In fact, the respondent’s lines contain a second error: Where he has written “un fleur,” La Fontaine’s line begins with “un fleuve.” The visual similarity between “ur” and “uve” suggests that the mistake is one of transcription; but it is impossible to tell from the text alone whether it is a mental “typo” or a problem with the original text. And yet, the awareness that the poem has in some way been altered adds credence to the feat: the error becomes a further indicator that the lines are in fact a visualized reproduction – that, as the respondent claimed, “I really do see an image.”

As we shall see, the issues raised by this poem – foreign, opaque, fragmented – recall those of Helen Keller’s “The Frost King,” a story she unconsciously plagiarized as a child. Keller was well-known as a psychological “phenomenon” at an early age.10 When she was twelve, William James brought his psychology class (one that included a young W. E. B. Du

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9 When the respondent’s lines appear in James’s abridged Briefer Course, the phrase has been mysteriously corrected to match La Fontaine’s. Perhaps, then, the mistake was James’s – a faulty transcription of the respondent’s report? William James, Psychology: Briefer Course, 1892, in Writings 1878-1899, edited by Gerald E. Myers, 1-444 (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 288.

10 Anne Sullivan, Keller’s teacher, was keenly interested in psychology, and read the work of both William James and James Sully; her account of Keller’s language acquisition was widely circulated years before Keller herself became a writer. See Joseph P. Lash, Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980).
Bois) to visit her — gifting her with an ostrich feather.\(^{11}\) Keller was later studied by Joseph Jastrow, who tested her mental capacities by asking her to reproduce long lists of letters and strings of nonsense syllables; as an adult, she contributed reports of her mental life to Jastrow for a chapter in \textit{Fact and Fable in Psychology} (1900).\(^{12}\)

For both Jastrow and James, Keller, like her predecessor, Laura Bridgman, provided clear evidence of the possibility that one could think in a variety of “material.” As James observed, in the case of the deaf-blind, it was \textit{certain} that “their entire thinking goes on in tactile and motor symbols.”\(^{13}\) In a 1904 essay, James discussed the two women: “What is not conjecture, but fact, is the philosophical conclusion which we are forced to draw from the cases both of Laura and of Helen,” he wrote.\(^{14}\)

What clearer proof could we ask of the fact that the relations among things, far more than the things themselves, are what is intellectually interesting, and that it makes little difference what terms we think in, so long as the relations maintain their character. All sorts of terms can transport the mind with equal delight, provided they are woven into equally massive and far-reaching schemes and systems of relationship.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{11}\) Du Bois wrote later: “When I was studying philosophy at Harvard under William James, we made an excursion one day out to Roxbury. We stopped at the Blind Asylum and saw a young girl who was blind and deaf and dumb, and yet who, by infinite pains and loving sympathy, had been made to speak without words and to understand without sounds. She was Helen Keller. Perhaps because she was blind to color differences in this world, I became intensely interested in her, and all through my life I have followed her career. Finally, there came the thing which I somehow sensed would come; Helen Keller was in her own state, Alabama, being feted and made much of by her fellow citizens. And yet courageously and frankly she spoke out on the iniquity and foolishness of the color line. It cost her something to speak. They wanted her to retract, but she sat serene in the consciousness of the truth that she had uttered. And so it was proven, as I knew it would be, that this woman who sits in darkness has a spiritual insight clearer than that of many wide-eyed people who stare uncomprehendingly at this prejudiced world.” W. E. B. Du Bois, “Helen Keller,” in \textit{Double Blossoms: Helen Keller Anthology}, ed. Edna Porter (New York: Lewis Copeland Company, 1931), 64.


\(^{14}\) James, “Laura Bridgman,” 98.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
James here echoes an insight from *Principles of Psychology*. In his chapter on “The Stream of Thought,” James drew upon the account of Melville Ballard in order to illustrate that “a deaf and dumb man can weave his tactile and visual images into a system of thought quite as effective and rational as that of a word-user.”\(^\text{16}\) From Ballard’s account (indeed from the fact that Ballard was writing at all) James argued that it was evident that “it makes little or no difference in what sort of mind-stuff, in what quality of imagery, his thinking goes on. The only images *intrinsically* important are the halting-places, the substantive conclusions, provisional or final, of the thought.”\(^\text{17}\)

In my final chapter, I will argue that Keller’s autobiography can be read as part of a psychological tradition – one that emerged out of the study of the imagination. Though *The Story of My Life* (1903) has been published in at least ten editions, there has been a near absence of literary criticism on the text. The emphasis on recovering Keller’s language as a speaking subject, I will suggest, has in some way obscured the work that she has done as a writer. Indeed, though Keller’s late twentieth-century readers have valiantly sought to “free” Keller to speak, they have also un-tethered her language; in order to recover Keller’s work as an author, I will argue, we will need to restore the tension – that is to say, the paradox – at the heart of her writing.

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\(^\text{16}\) James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 267.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 269.
the line. I find this much easier to do if the words begin in a straight line than if there are breaks. Example:

Étant fait . . . . .
Tous . . . . .
À des . . . . .
Que fit . . . . .
Cèses . . . . .
Avec . . . . .
Un fleur . . . . .
Comme . . . . .
(La Fontaine 8. iv.)"

The poor visualizer says:

"My ability to form mental images seems, from what I have studied of other people's images, to be defective, and somewhat peculiar. The process by which I seem to remember any particular event is not by a series of distinct images, but a sort of panorama, the faintest impressions of which are perceptible through a thick fog.—I cannot shut my eyes and get a distinct image of anyone, although I used to be able to a few years ago, and the faculty seems to have gradually slipped away. —In my most vivid dreams, where the events appear like the most real

Figure 1. From William James, Principles of Psychology (1890).
I. A Plagiarism and a Feat of Memory

In *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller describes the moment of her “soul’s sudden awakening.”¹⁸ Deaf and blind from the age of nineteen months, she had been “locked in” until age seven, when Anne Sullivan came to her as a teacher. In the famous scene at the water pump, Keller finally learns that all objects have a name; what she called the “mystery of language” was revealed to her.¹⁹

The scene is nearly mythic now. Yet, though it is seldom noted, *The Story of My Life* contains not one, but two accounts of language acquisition: One dating from the moment at the water pump, one from the moment when Keller read her “first connected story.”²⁰ “From that day to this,” Keller writes, “I have devoured everything in the shape of a printed page that has come within the reach of my hungry finger tips.”²¹ Nearly all of Keller’s knowledge of the world came in the form of words – through the descriptions that Sullivan, her lifelong companion, signed into her hand. Literature offered Keller an alternate voice to that of Sullivan. When asked, as a child, why she loved books, she replied, “They tell so much that is interesting about things I cannot see, and they are never tired or troubled like people. They tell me over and over what I want to know.”²²

More than this, however, Keller used literature as a form of reference. As she explained in *The Story of My Life*, “I have depended on books, not only for pleasure and for the wisdom

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¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 278. She read her first books “until the words were so worn and pressed I could scarcely make them out” (Ibid., 84). Indeed, throughout Keller’s life – even into her mature writing – books appear as “companions” in whose “beloved society” she would spend many of her waking hours (“Letter-Box,” 284). Helen Keller, letter to “The Letter-Box,” *St. Nicholas* 21, no. 3 (January 1894).
they bring to all who read, but also for that knowledge which comes to others through their eyes and ears.”

The structure of the language itself functioned as a source of knowledge. Through metaphor, Keller was provided with clues to perceptual experiences that were not directly available to her. She mined the conventions and clichés of poetry for associations between sensory experiences that were familiar (touch, taste, motion, scent), and those that were foreign (color, light, sound). Through these “correspondences,” she said, her perception was extended.

As one might suspect, however, metaphors are not always a reliable source of knowledge. In 1892, when Keller was a child, she and Sullivan visited a schoolroom equipped with a spinning wheel. One observer recounted Keller’s interaction with the machine:

The instant her fingers touched the flax, she cried, ‘Flax! It is blue!’ Her teacher hastened to tell her that it is only the flower that is blue, and that flax itself is white. Helen quickly began:

*Blue were her eyes as the fairy flax*  
*Her cheeks like the dawn of day.*

‘Yes,’ said Miss Sullivan; ‘the poet referred to the flowers.’

And yet, in the copious writing documenting Keller’s life, the scene is one of only a very few to recount an error in her understanding of concepts such as color, light and sound. In fact, what was most surprising (and troubling) to many of Keller’s readers was the apparent ease with which she described sensations and effects of which she could have no first-hand knowledge. Critics, psychologists and philosophers puzzled over passages like the following, in which Keller described a childhood encounter with snow:

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23 Keller, *Story, Modern*, 84.

24 Color, especially, had become “real” to her through such association. She later wrote that she had “read so much about colors that through no will of my own I attach meanings to them” (*World, 69*). Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*, 1908 (New York: New York Review Books, 2003).

When the first snow-flakes began to fall, we rushed out-doors, and for some hours they could be seen, descending majestically from the high regions of the atmosphere and then, silently, with a very gentle movement, falling all over the country and leveling the plain. Darkness fell over all this whiteness. The next morning the scenery was entirely changed; the roads had quite disappeared and also the boundaries of the fields; a snowy desert had stretched out as far as the eye could see, and the trees emerged like so many white phantoms.

Keller could not know what darkness was, nor whiteness, that snow was silent, nor that it covered a distance “as far as the eye could see.” Was she simply repeating what Anne Sullivan had said? Was it an imaginative description, informed by her reading? Was this somehow an authentic account of her recollection of the day? Or, perhaps more troublingly, could it be all three? As many of her readers noted, her writing at these moments could be nothing other than a literary reproduction — for some, far too close to plagiarism.

Plagiarism was not, in fact, a far-fetched paradigm. In her early reports, Sullivan often remarked upon the value of literature in Keller’s acquisition of language. Keller, Sullivan wrote, “made great use of such descriptions and comparisons as appeal to her imagination and fine poetic nature.” By way of example, Sullivan included a number of extracts from Keller’s childhood letters. In one, Keller described the coming of spring: “The blue-bird with his azure plumes, the thrush clad all in brown, the robin jerking his spasmodic throat, the oriole drifting like a flake of fire … the red-bird with his one sweet trill, and the busy little wren, are all making the trees in our front yard ring with their glad songs,” Keller wrote. Keller drew the language directly from an Oliver Wendell Holmes poem, which began in the same manner:

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28 Ibid., 297.
The bluebird, breathing from his azure plumes,
The fragrance borrowed from the myrtle blooms;
The thrush, poor wanderer, dropping meekly down,
Clad in his remnant of autumnal brown;
The oriole, drifting like a flake of fire…

“The pictures the language paints on her memory appear to make an indelible impression,”
Sullivan concluded; “many times, when an experience comes to her similar in character, the
language starts forth with wonderful accuracy, like the reflection from a mirror.”

As Sullivan observed, Keller’s “power of retaining the memory of beautiful language”
was of great use to her in her double limitation. “I have always been much pleased to observe
how appropriately she applies the expressions of a favourite author in her own compositions,”
Sullivan wrote. And yet, Sullivan admitted, “I have not in the past been fully aware to what
extent she absorbs the language of her favourite authors.”

She was at times bewildered by Keller’s spontaneous observations:

One day in Alabama, as we were gathering wild flowers near the springs on the hillsides,
[Keller] seemed to understand for the first time that the springs were surrounded by
mountains, and she exclaimed, ‘The mountains are crowding around the springs to look
at their own beautiful reflections!’

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29 Ibid. Incidentally, Mark Twain himself at one point “unconsciously plagiarized” Oliver Wendell Holmes. See footnote 51 below.

30 Ibid., 298.

31 Ibid., 296. Sullivan would spend the day spelling out a description of the visual scene to Keller; in the evening she
might spell a novel into Keller’s hand. At times, Keller seemed not to understand the distinction between these two
stories – one a faithful account of the world around them, authored by Sullivan; one a fictional story. After Sullivan
read *Little Lord Fauntleroy* into her hand, Keller seemed to imagine that the main character was real, a “sweet and
gentle companion.” In an earnest letter she wrote that she “should like very much to see Fauntleroy’s great dog,


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 298.
“I do not know where she obtained this language,” Sullivan wrote. “Yet it is evident that it must have come to her from without, as it would hardly be possible for a person deprived of the visual sense to originate such an idea.”

And yet, though it was evident that Keller could not have “originated” the idea, Keller herself could not be of much help. Indeed, though, as a child, Keller often included “adaptations” of other writing in her letters, Keller did not herself recall the sources – or even seem to be aware that she was quoting. Rather, Keller seemed to believe that the descriptions were her own. "At that time I eagerly absorbed everything I read without a thought of authorship, and even now I cannot be quite sure of the boundary line between my ideas and those I find in books," she later explained. "I suppose that is because so many of my impressions come to me through the medium of others’ eyes and ears."

Keller’s inability to distinguish between ideas she had “originated” and those she had acquired “from without” came to a head in 1891. Keller, then only eleven, composed a story for Michael Anagnos, her mentor at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. The story, entitled “The Frost King,” included poetic evocations of color, light and distance – leaves “painted” with “gold and crimson and emerald,” bridges “transparent as glass.” The story, Sullivan recounted,

35 Ibid., 298. Sullivan cited a second example here as well: “In mentioning a visit to Lexington, Mass., [Helen] writes, ’As we rode along we could see the forest monarchs bend their proud forms to listen to the children of the woodlands whispering their secrets. The anemone, the wild violet, the hepatica, and the funny little curled-up ferns all peeped out at us from beneath the brown leaves.’ She closes this letter with, ’I must go to bed, for Morpheus has touched my eyelids with his golden wand.’ ” “Here again,” Sullivan observed, “I am unable to state where she acquired these expressions” (Ibid., 298-9).

36 Ibid., 299. Sullivan documented a number of other instances, drawn from Keller’s conversation and letters: in an 1889 letter, Keller “gave a reproduction from one of Hans Christian Anderson’s stories”; on other occasions her speech had been found to contain fragments from Longfellow’s “Snowflakes” and “Hiawatha” (Ibid., 296).

37 Ibid., 52.

38 Ibid.

39 Helen Keller, The Story of My Life (with her letters 1887-1901 and a supplementary account of her education, including passages from the reports and letters of her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, by John Albert Macy) (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), 411; 408.
“occasioned much comment on account of the beautiful imagery, and we could not understand how Helen could describe such pictures without the aid of sight.”\textsuperscript{40} Though they asked her where she had read it, Keller said “I did not read it; it is my story for Mr. Anagnos’s birthday.”\textsuperscript{41}

Anagnos printed the story in the Institute’s annual report; upon later examination however, Keller’s writing proved to be a near word-for-word reproduction of “The Frost Fairies” – a children’s story that had apparently been read to Keller without Sullivan’s knowledge.\textsuperscript{42} When Sullivan explained to Keller that “The Frost King” was not her own writing, Keller was baffled. Keller explained her confusion in a letter:

Some one wrote to Mr. Anagnos that the story which I sent him as a birthday gift, and which I wrote myself, was not my story at all, but that a lady had written it a long time ago. The person said her story was called “Frost Fairies.” I am sure I never heard it. … It troubles me greatly now. I do not know what I shall do. I never thought that people could make such mistakes. I am perfectly sure I wrote the story myself. Mr. Anagnos is much troubled. It grieves me to think that I have been the cause of his unhappiness, but of course I did not mean to do it. … I thought everybody had the same thought about the leaves, but I do not know now.\textsuperscript{43}

Eventually Keller would come to understand her error, but the “Frost King” affair was deeply traumatic. Keller was questioned before a jury (four blind individuals, four sighted) at the Perkins Institute and Anagnos and Sullivan became estranged. As Keller later observed, “one thing is certain, the language was ineffaceably stamped on my brain, though for a long time no one knew it, least of all myself.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40} Keller, \textit{Story}, Modern, 299.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{42} It seems likely that Sullivan \textit{did} read Keller the story, but either forgot this fact, or blamed another in embarrassment. See Lash, \textit{Helen}, 138.  
\textsuperscript{43} Keller, \textit{Story}, Modern, 302.  
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 54.
A SUPPLEMENTARY ACCOUNT

About the same time, in a letter to a friend, in which she makes mention of her Southern home, she gives so close a reproduction from a poem by one of her favourite authors that I will give extracts from Helen's letter and from the poem itself:

EXTRACTS FROM HELEN'S LETTER

[The entire letter is published on pp. 245 and 246 of the Report of the Perkins Institution for 1891]

The bluebird, breathing from his azure plumes
The fragrance borrowed from the myrtle blooms;
The thrush, poor wanderer, dropping wearily down,
Clad in his remnant of autumnal brown;
The oriole, drifting like a flake of fire
Rent by a whirlwind from a blazing spire;
The robin, jerking his spasmodic throat,
Repeats imperious, his staccato note;
The crack-brained bobolink courts his crazy mate,
Poised on a bullrush tipsy with his weight:
Nay, in his cage the lone canary sings,
Feels the soft air, and spreads his idle wings.

On the last day of April she uses another expression from the same poem, which is more an adaptation than a reproduction: "To-morrow April will hide her tears and blushes beneath the flowers of lovely May."

In a letter to a friend* at the Perkins Institution, dated May 17, 1889, she gives a reproduction from one of Hans Christian *Page 170.

Figure 2. A page from the Supplement to The Story of My Life (1903) illustrating one of Keller's early "reproductions."
Keller devoted a full chapter of *The Story of My Life* to “The Frost King” affair: “I have never played with words again for the mere pleasure of the game,” she writes.45 “Indeed, I have ever since been tortured by the fear that what I write is not my own. For a long time, when I wrote a letter, even to my mother, I was seized with a sudden feeling of terror, and I would spell the sentences over and over, to make sure that I had not read them in a book.”46

And yet, though the “The Frost King” incident occupies only one chapter of Keller’s autobiography, the questions raised by the event come to haunt the reading of Keller’s entire narrative. Directly after her account of the affair, Keller describes the difficulty of beginning to write again:

The summer and winter following the ‘Frost King’ incident I spent with my family in Alabama. I recall with delight that home-going. Everything had budded and blossomed. I was happy. ‘The Frost King’ was forgotten.

When the ground was strewn with crimson and golden leaves of autumn, when the musk-scented grapes that covered the arbour at the end of the garden were turning golden brown in the sunshine, I began to write a sketch of my life — a year after I had written ‘The Frost King.’

I was still excessively scrupulous about what I wrote. The thought that what I wrote might not be absolutely my own tormented me. A strange sensitiveness prevented me from referring to the ‘Frost King’; and often when an idea flashed out in the course of conversation I would spell softly to her, ‘I am not sure it is mine.’ At other times, in the midst of a paragraph I was writing, I said to myself, ‘Suppose it should be found that all this was written by some one long ago!’ An impish fear clutched my hand, so that I could not write any more that day.47

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 58.
Keller’s description of her “excessively scrupulous” attention to the source of her thought is disturbed by her evocation of the “crimson and gold leaves of autumn” – a use of the *same metaphor*, on the *same subject* as her plagiarism in “The Frost King” itself. The passage presents an implicit challenge to the reader: the language seemingly cannot be Keller’s “original” and yet, here she provocatively asserts it as her own. As one of *Story’s* reviewers skeptically commented, “What are we to think of so many visual and auditive impressions rushing to the imagination of a person blind and deaf, and forming so many pictures?” “Do the memories of her life then date from the shades of colour of leaves and grapes?”  

In *Story*, Keller herself acknowledged that her particular relationship to reading continued to affect her writing – including the writing of the autobiography at hand:

> It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind. Consequently, in nearly all that I write, I produce something which very much resembles the crazy patchwork I used to make when I first learned to sew. This patchwork was made of all sorts of odds and ends – pretty bits of silk and velvet; but the coarse pieces that were not pleasant to touch always predominated. Likewise my compositions are made up of crude notions of my own, inlaid with the brighter thoughts and riper opinions of the authors I have read.  

As Keller pointed out, this could describe the predicament of any young writer searching to find an authentic voice. After reading the autobiography, Mark Twain wrote to Keller to commend this observation: “Oh, dear me, how unspeakably funny and owlishly idiotic and grotesque was that plagiarism farce! As if there was much of anything in any human utterance, oral or written, *except plagiarism!*”  

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49 Keller, *Story*, Modern, 55.

50 Quoted in Lash, *Helen*, 146-7. Twain and Keller met in 1895 and were friends until Twain’s death.
And yet, for many of the book’s readers, the “crazy patchwork” of Keller’s writing seemed far too apparent. In the critical response to *The Story of My Life*, reviewers commented upon Keller’s frequent use of reference to color, light, sound and distance as only more subtle instances of what might be called “The Frost King” problem. *The Nation’s* review of the book exemplified this line of critique. Keller, the reviewer argued, had exhibited an “illegitimate use of the imagination” in her evocation of sights and sounds that she could not directly experience:

All her knowledge is hearsay knowledge, her very sensations are for the most part vicarious, and yet she writes of the things beyond her power of perception with the assurance of one who has verified every word.51

By writing of things she could not know first-hand, *The Nation* argued, “every fact of real psychological value” in the book had been “perversely withheld” – “the few observations of importance that she does record being so mingled with her own imaginings in regard to the perceptions of others as to be worthless.”52 Keller, rather, should have “confined herself to that which is within her own knowledge.”53 *The Nation* excerpted a few passages from *Story* – particularly keen instances of Keller’s literary violations. The examples included Keller’s description of real ships receding from the shore:

The glorious bay lay calm and beautiful in the October sunshine, and the ships came and went like idle dreams; those seaward going slowly disappeared like clouds that change from gold to gray; those homeward coming sped more quickly, like birds that seek their mother’s nest.54

as well as her assessment of Virgil’s literary style:

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52 Ibid., 362.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Virgil is serene and lovely, like a marble Apollo in the moonlight. Homer is a beautiful animated youth in the full sunlight with the wind in his hair.\textsuperscript{55}

and her account of a reception at a club:

The rooms are large and splendidly furnished; but I must confess, so much splendor is rather oppressive to me.\textsuperscript{56}

amongst others. It did not matter, then, whether Keller was describing a visual scene; using a visual metaphor; or in the last instance, using language with an implied grounding in visual experience – in any case, Keller was producing only “second-hand descriptions.”\textsuperscript{57} At such moments, Keller’s language may have been both technically accurate and metaphorically evocative, but the reader nevertheless knew that her language had no source other than the narration of Anne Sullivan or the words she had encountered in literature.

After the publication of \textit{The Story of My Life}, Keller responded to \textit{The Nation} by proposing a thought experiment. She invited her readers to imagine themselves stranded on an island “where the inhabitants speak a language unknown to him, and their experiences are unlike anything he has known.”\textsuperscript{58} This, she explained, was precisely her predicament:

I was one, they were many, there was no chance of compromise. I must learn to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears, to think in their language, and I bent all my energies to the task. … Had it occurred to me to build a little tower of Babel for myself and others shipwrecked like me, do you think you would have scaled my castle wall or ventured to communicate with my dumb hieroglyphics? Should you have thought it worthwhile to find out what kind of ideas the silent, sightless inhabitants of that tower had originated in their isolation from the rest of mankind? … I suspect that if I had confined myself strictly to that which I knew of my own observation, without mingling it with derived

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 362.

\textsuperscript{58} Quoted in Lash, \textit{Helen}, 293.
knowledge, my critic would have understood me as little as he probably does the Chinese.\(^{59}\)

If she had written in her own “native idiom,” she asserted, her “dumb hieroglyphics” would only be intelligible to a people born blind and deaf. Locked in a “tower of Babel,” she had an authentic language, native to her own “world,” but it was not one that her readers shared. By Keller’s own account, then, she was always translating.

John Macy, Keller’s editor, defended Keller in precisely the same terms. Responding directly to *The Nation*, he wrote to *The Boston Evening Transcript* asking, “Does the sterile and literal mind of the critic need metaphors translated?”\(^{60}\)

Helen Keller does use words which mean to other people something which she cannot know just as we know it. What these words mean to her, we cannot say without consulting her, and it is obviously difficult for her to tell us. There is no special vocabulary for the deaf-blind. If there were, we who see and hear could not be sure we understood it. The deaf-blind person must use as best he can the vocabulary made for him by a race with eyes and ears.\(^{61}\)

No one, Macy wrote, including Anne Sullivan, “can ever tell whether she is truly or falsely setting down her impressions or opinions. We who see and hear can only take humbly at their face value the words of our vocabulary which she uses.”\(^{62}\) Thus, Macy asserted, though Keller’s autobiography was written in her “natural idiom,” it was one that had no reliable translation. Keller’s language was, in effect, hermetically sealed.\(^{63}\)

\(^{59}\) Quoted in Lash, *Helen*, 293-294.


\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Anne Sullivan made the same observation. In one of Sullivan’s letters, included in the Supplement, she describes a drive she took with Keller; upon their return, Keller repeated Sullivan’s precise words back to her mother: “…in telling her mother *repeated the very words and phrases I had used in describing it to her, … I don’t see how anyone is ever to know what impression she did receive, or the cause of her pleasure in what was told her about it. All that*
The literary appraisal of Keller’s writing often prompted this insight. In the introduction to Keller’s 1929 memoir, *Midstream: My Later Life*, Nella Braddy, Keller’s friend and editor, figured Keller in the same terms:

In her descriptions of San Francisco, to which objections are sure to be raised, she is not repeating something she has been told. She is telling what she has built up for herself out of the descriptions she has read and those that have been spelled to her. In what way her picture differs from ours we cannot say, for she has only our language to use in describing it.\(^{64}\)

As Braddy observed, Keller and the rest of humanity found themselves “on opposite sides of a wall” – and there was simply “no way to break it down.”\(^{65}\) Thus, as one of Keller’s psychological examiners explained, the blind and the deaf “may use our words, but they may never know the meaning of many of those words to us, nor we their meaning to them.”\(^{66}\)

And yet, though this account of Keller’s language cleared her of the charge of plagiarism, it remained difficult to know whether Keller’s “translation” from “her” language to “our” own was in fact an accurate one. Indeed, while this argument allowed one to sidestep the question of reference, it remained difficult to know how to appraise a text written in a language that could not be deciphered.

William James encountered a similar problem when discussing the experience of the “deaf-mute” Melville Ballard. Ballard’s writing had provided substantive evidence for James’s conception of the “stream of thought.” But, as with any report of mental imagery, it was possible

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\(^{65}\) Ibid., xxi.

that Ballard was a fabulist – or simply misremembering. Indeed, a critic of *Principles* had written to ask whether James had “made sure” that Ballard was “trustworthy.”

In his essay, “Thought Before Language: A Deaf-Mute’s Recollections” (1892), James addressed this critique directly. He provided a number of affidavits for Ballard, including that of a professor who wrote on Ballard’s behalf: “‘[Ballard’s] recollection of those early years is so distinct, he recalls so vividly other circumstances which are directly associated with the train of thought described … that I am compelled to accept his statement as ‘unconditionally trustworthy.’” In light of this and other testimony, James concluded that Ballard made “an exceptionally good witness.”

In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein posed the same question as James’s critic. How, after all, could James know that Ballard was accurately representing his imaginative experience? In *Principles*, James had included an excerpt from Ballard’s memoir; Ballard here described a drive with his family, taken in the time before he had learned words: “‘I have a vivid recollection,’” Ballard writes, “‘of the delight I felt in watching the different scenes we passed through, observing the various phases of nature, both animate and inanimate; though we did not, owing to my infirmity, engage in conversation.’” Wittgenstein responded to James’s passage thus:

William James, in order to shew that thought is possible without speech, quotes the recollection of a deaf-mute, Mr. Ballard, who wrote that in his early youth, even before he could speak, he had had thought about God and the world. – What can he have meant?

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68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 On the dialogue between Wittgenstein and James, see Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 550, particularly footnote 29.

71 James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 268.
Ballard writes: ‘It was during those delightful rides, some two or three years before my initiation into the rudiments of written language, that I began to ask myself the question: how came the world into being?’ – Are you sure – one would like to ask – that this is the correct translation of your wordless thoughts into words? And why does this question – which otherwise seems not to exist? – raise its head here? Do I want to say that the writer’s memory deceives him? – I don’t even know if I should say that. These recollections are a queer memory phenomenon, – and I do not know what conclusions one can draw from them about the past of the man who recounts them.72

A few paragraphs later, Wittgenstein returned to the topic. James had argued that “these deaf-mutes have learned only a gesture-language, but each of them talks to himself inwardly in a vocal language.”73 Wittgenstein objected:

– Now, don’t you understand that? – But how do I know whether I understand it?! – What can I do with this information (if it is such)? The whole idea of understanding smells fishy here. I do not know whether I am to say I understand it or don’t understand it. I might answer ‘It’s an English sentence; apparently quite in order – that is, until one wants to do something with it; it has a connexion with other sentences which makes it difficult for us to say that nobody really knows what it tells us; but anyone who has not become calloused by doing philosophy notices that there is something wrong here.’74

Wittgenstein’s exasperation here is apparent: “How do I know whether I understand it?! What can I do with this information (if it is such)?” It was impossible to know whether Ballard’s account of his own mental state represented the “correct translation.” The best one could say was “It’s an English sentence; apparently quite in order.”


73 Ibid., 94e.

74 Ibid.
Wittgenstein’s question echoes that of *The Nation*: “Of what use are such records as these?” And though many of Keller’s readers wished to defend the book against this complaint, Keller often seemed to be producing “an English sentence; *apparently* quite in order.” Indeed, though the majority of the book’s reviewers commended *The Story of My Life*, the terms of praise remained somewhat strikingly limited. Macy’s own account of Keller’s “literary style” began with the observation that “no one can have read Miss Keller’s autobiography without feeling that she writes unusually fine English.” Over the course of the next few paragraphs, he asserts that she “writes good English”; writes “fine English”; and has a “skill in the use of English.” Other readers assessed the merits of the book in similar terms. “Here is the narrative of a young woman who has been deaf and blind from infancy, written in idiomatic English, and indicating that possession of a culture well above the level of that owned by the average college girl of her age,” one reviewer wrote. “Such an achievement is a new thing in the world.” Keller’s narrative could be called an “achievement” not because of the story it told, but because it constituted so compelling a demonstration of Keller’s *ability* to use “good,” rather than broken “English.”

Indeed, in the critical appraisal of the book, reviewers often replaced an assessment of Keller’s writing style with an appreciation of her literal capacity to write. Thus, in a rather remarkable piece of literary analysis, the writer Edward Everett Hale suggested that Keller’s

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75 *Nation*, 362.

76 Keller, *Story*, Modern, 292. Macy makes this argument at the expense of Sullivan, whose style, he says, is not as fine as Keller’s.

77 Ibid., 293–4.

account proved “the loss so terrible of sight and sound is not without compensation.” He commented upon the aspect of Story that best conveyed this particular insight:

… after four months of study, she wrote with her own pencil a letter to her mother which was perfectly legible. It begins, ‘Helen will write mother letter. Papa did give Helen medicine. Mildred will sit in swing,’ and so on for twenty short lines. Two months after[,] she wrote to the blind girls at the Boston Asylum the letter, more legible than the average letter which I receive in my daily correspondence (and this means wholly legible), which begins, ‘Helen will write little blind girls a letter. Helen and Teacher will come to see little blind girls. Helen and Teacher will go in steam cars to Boston.’

My attention was called very early to what still seems to me an interesting fact that in one of these early letters Helen wrote the word chrysanthemum with perfect accuracy. Miss Sullivan says that it sometimes seems as if she took in a long word more easily than a short one. Not long since[,] I asked them about his, and was told, in reply, that Miss Sullivan could not recall any occasion — in almost twenty years, observe — when Helen had forgotten the spelling of any word that she had learned to spell. Hale here conflates Keller’s facility with language (her status as an author) with her literal ability to write (“with her own pencil,” “twenty short lines”). In doing so, he also conflates the clarity of Keller’s writing (its communicability to those who can see and hear) with the fact that it is literally legible (readable as marks) at all. Nothing of the particular language of Keller’s account registers here of course – only that Keller’s missive was interpretable and that the word “chrysanthemum” is composed of 13 letters.

This is perhaps why, in the hundreds of articles published about Keller throughout her lifetime, it was commonplace to print a sample of Keller’s handwriting. (Figures 3, 4 and 5.)

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79 Edward Everett Hale, “Helen Keller’s Life,” Outlook 86, no. 8 (June 22, 1907), 378.
80 Ibid., 379.
81 Keller’s seemingly “uncanny” spelling ability is likely the result of Keller’s particular experience – one in which words were originally encountered in their written, rather than spoken, form. The series of motions upon the hand that constitute the finger-spelling of $w + a + t + e + r$ functioned as the equivalent of speech uttered to a baby. If Keller were ever to later misspell a word, it would be as if a toddler were mispronouncing a word she had heard.
Dear St. Nicholas;

It gives me very great pleasure to send you my autograph, because I want the boys and girls who read St. Nicholas to know how blind children write. I suppose some of them wonder how we keep the lines straight so I will try to tell them how it is done. We have a grooved board which we put between the pages when we wish to write. The parallel grooves correspond to lines and when we have pressed the paper into them by means of the blunt end of the pencil it is very easy to keep the words even. The small letters are all made in the grooves, while the long ones extend above and below them. We guide the pencil with the right hand, and feel carefully with the tips of the left hand to see that we shape and space the letters correctly. It is very difficult at first to form them plainly, but if we keep on trying it gradually becomes easier, and after a great deal of practice we can write legible letters to our friends. Then we are very, very happy. Sometimes they may visit a school for the blind. If they do, I am sure, they will wish to see the pupils write.

Very sincerely yours,

Helen Keller.

He answered as he shook hands with her, and she smiled a bright reply.

Thus, for each one she had some cordial word of greeting.

"My favorite study is geography," she remarked, "because then I can learn all about the world and its different countries."

Some one gave her a "Jack-in-the-pulpit," and inquired, "Does he preach?" "Oh, yes," she answered. "He preaches to all the other flowers, but he is not so large as dear Dr. Brooks"—referring to Phillips Brooks, who is one of her staunch friends.

"Yes, I love to play," she replied to a question from a little girl; "but I like best to study; and I love poetry. Who is your favorite poet? Mine is Holmes." Mr. Holmes is a personal friend of hers, and she also knows Mr. Whittier and has visited him.

Helen's is a poetical nature, and with her strong imagination and quick mind her language is often beautiful and full of pretty metaphors and similes.

A purse was made up for Tommy, which delighted her very much.

In the afternoon we all gathered in the chapel, and heard from Miss Marrett something about the system of teaching in the asylum. In speaking of the library, she alluded to Dickens's works. Helen, reading the words by the medium of Miss Sullivan's fingers, bent forward eagerly and asked, "How does Dickens write?"

None of us could say, and

Figure 3. Sample of Keller's handwriting from "A Visit From Helen Keller," St. Nicholas (June 1892).
Figure 4. Sample of Keller’s handwriting and Braille, from “Helen Keller,” *St. Nicholas* (September 1889).
HELEN KELLER.

In Science of Feb. 24 we gave an account of Helen Keller, a second Laura Bridgman, who, although blind and deaf, is making wonderful advances in her education. This week we give her the first instruction to her pupil, who was then six years old. In a month the little girl learned to spell about four hundred words, and in less than three months could write a letter unsnapped by any one. In six weeks she mastered the Braille (French) system, which is a

good to see you in Washington. I saw your picture. I did not.

Dear Mr. Bell, I am glad to write you a letter. Father will send you pictures. I heard that your doctor is in Washington. He looked at

portrait and that of her teacher, Miss Annie Sullivan, a graduate of the Perkins Institute at Boston, and also reproduce in facsimile a letter written by Helen Keller to A. Graham Bell of Washington. It was only in March, 1887, that Miss Sullivan was engaged to give cipher for the blind, enabling them to read what they have written. She has also mastered addition, multiplication, subtraction, and geography. The illustration shows the method in which all this information has been transmitted,—solely through the sense of touch.

Figure 5. From “Helen Keller,” Science (April 1888).
Indeed, the first edition of *The Story of My Life* opens not with a photograph of Keller, but with a facsimile of a letter she wrote as a child and a page that she later wrote in Braille. *(Figures 6 and 7.)* Though the text of the letter is reprinted in full in the book’s second part, as a frontispiece it appears as an abruptly broken excerpt – a *sample* of the manuscript that follows, written in Keller’s strange square-hand. Placed directly before Keller’s story begins, the image serves as an evocation of the material form in which Keller composed much of her autobiography – the book that we are, of course, about to read.

The logic of the “sample,” I would argue, extends to the meaning of Keller’s entire autobiography: it is not necessary to read the full 140 pages, one need only know *that* Keller used words, idiomatically, grammatically, spelled properly, in order. Presented with this sample of Keller’s handwriting, one need not read the story – rather, one might simply look at the page and recognize that the writing is, as Hale points out, legible. The fragmented letter placed at the beginning of the text functions as an equivalent substitution for Keller’s full narrative, which could be entirely elided in favor of the affidavits provided in the Supplement. If, after all, one could never know precisely the meaning of Keller’s words, it didn’t much matter *what* she said; the wonder was *that* she had spoken. As John Macy observed, “That she has told her story, and told it so well, is half the story itself.”

Keller was not, perhaps, writing “dumb hieroglyphics” then, but if one could never verify the “translation,” all one could be sure of was that she was writing in a language that *looked like* our own. In this context, even Keller’s unconscious plagiarisms could be understood as no less (and in some ways more) valuable than Keller’s consciously penned autobiography. Both were

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prodigious feats of writing that, like the good visualizer’s broken poem, provided insight into the writer’s mental disposition without actually needing to be read. Thus, Margaret Canby, the author of “The Frost Fairies,” suggested that though Keller’s was nearly a word-for-word reproduction of her own story, Keller’s version was in some way an “original” contribution.\(^{83}\) In a letter to Anne Sullivan, included in the Supplement, Canby wrote to absolve Keller:

> What a wonderfully active and retentive mind that gifted child must have! If she had remembered and written down accurately, a short story, and that soon after hearing it, it would have been a marvel; but to have heard the story once, three years ago, and in such a way that neither her parents nor teacher could ever allude to it or refresh her memory about it, and then to have been able to reproduce it so vividly, even adding some touches of her own in perfect keeping with the rest, which really improve the original, is something that very few girls of riper age, and with every advantage of sight, hearing, and even great talents for composition, could have done as well, if at all. Under the circumstances, I do not see how any one can be so unkind as to call it a plagiarism; it is a wonderful feat of memory, and stands alone, as doubtless much of her work will in future, if her mental powers grow and develop with her years as greatly as in the few years past. … She is indeed a ‘Wonder-Child.’\(^{84}\)

The confusion of register here is instructive. The wonder inspired by Keller’s ability to literally “reproduce it so vividly” (that is to say, word-by-word) is extended to an appreciation of Keller’s “vivid” (that is to say, “original”) writing style. Keller’s “Frost King” was printed in parallel columns to “The Frost Fairies,” a comparison that occupied more than seven pages of text. The juxtaposition is intended to affirm Canby’s assessment – to suggest the scale of Keller’s “wonderful feat of memory,” performed after three years, upon hearing the story only once.

\(^{83}\) Keller, Story, Modern, 301.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.
I left the well-house

eager to learn. Everything

had a name, and each

name gave birth to a

new thought. As we

returned to the house,

every object I touched

seemed to quiver with life.

Facsimile of the braille manuscript of the passage on page 9, with equivalents—slightly reduced. (Underlined combinations of letters have one sign in braille. Note the omission of the vowels before "r" in "learn," and the joining of the sign for "to" with the word that follows it.)

Figure 6. Frontispiece to The Story of My Life (1903).
The page appears before the Editor’s Preface.
So, Boston, May 1, 1891.
My dear Mr. Brooks,

Helen sends you a loving greeting this bright May-day. My teacher has just told me that you have been made a bishop, and that your friends everywhere are rejoicing because one whom they love has been greatly honored. I do not understand very well what a bishop's work is, but I am sure it must be good and helpful, and I am glad that my dear friend is partly wise and loving enough to do it. It is very beautiful to think that you can tell so

Figure 7. Illustration to The Story of My Life (1903).
The pages (which do not continue) appear directly before Keller's autobiography begins.
In the process of checking Keller’s text against Canby’s, one might likewise discover evidence of Keller’s “wonderfully active and retentive mind.”

Whereas *The Nation* had suggested that Keller’s language was only a hollow “imitation of someone else,” here Keller’s language is valued for the very strength of its reproduction. And yet, though Canby, like Macy, sought to value Keller’s writing, their approval, I would argue, presented only the flip side of the same linguistic trap. As Canby’s letter implies, Keller’s readers were given only two choices of interpretation: “plagiarism” or “feat of memory.” Thus, while Keller’s critics likened her language to “a parrot-like habit,” Macy countered with the assertion that the very facility of her performance was a marvel: “She has succeeded in being anything but herself, for herself was a mute, and her imitation is a splendid woman with speech, the most imitative possession the individual can show.” One could either censure her for “vicarious” language, or stand in awe of the “splendid” simulacrum of language that she had produced – a hollow text or a shadow one; in either case, Keller’s words seemed not to be referring to much of anything at all.

Keller would lament, throughout her life, that her reflections on subjects like the tariff, the Dreyfus case and socialism were deemed uninteresting. Instead she was asked over and over again to reflect on the moment of her creation – the scene at the water pump. “Every book is in a sense autobiographical,” she wrote, but “other self-recording creatures are permitted at least to seem to change the subject.” James’s good visualizer reproduced a text as a picture – but if the broken poem “meant” something, it was as an artifact – the product of a performance of memory.

85 Ibid.
86 *Nation*, 361.
87 Villey. *World*, 317; Macy, “Critics.”
Likewise, Keller’s contribution to *The Story of My Life* testified to the “miracle” of its own production – but that was almost *all* that her writing – or she herself – seemed to be able to say.

In *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2006), Walter Benn Michaels observes, “It’s only when the sign becomes the signifier that the otherness of the other matters; it’s only when the question of what you believe becomes irrelevant that the question of who you are becomes essential.” In the case of Helen Keller one could easily invert the observation: When the otherness of the other matters, signs become signifiers; when the question of who you are is essential, the question of what you believe becomes irrelevant. If she could not change the subject, however, she could constantly re-embody it. As we shall see, if Keller’s “otherness” created a confusion about the status of her signification, she exploited this very confusion in her writing. Keller, I will argue, deploys the structural homology between herself and her words – her language and her psychology – as a means by which to “meet” her reader, across an otherwise “indecipherable” gap.

Such as Keller’s writing has been addressed at all, her work – and she herself – has largely been understood as subject to an antiquated understanding of disability and its critical relation to language. As Mary Klages observes, *The Nation’s* “review placed Keller firmly back in the category of ‘disabled’ subject, removing her right to inscribe herself as a sighted and

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90 In addition to Mary Klages and Cynthia Ozick, see Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 134. Jodi Cressman is one of the few who mock Keller’s style: “Much of the autobiography reads like this description of Keller’s initial meeting with Alexander Graham Bell: ‘I came up out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched my spirit and gave it sight so that I beheld many wonders. And from the sacred mountain I head a voice which said, ‘Knowledge is love and light and vision.’ Who could miss the moral? … It is especially ironic that Keller’s experience interests everybody and her opinions interest nobody precisely because so much of her autobiographical writing is, like her description of Bell, bookish and clichéd.” Jodi Cressman, “The Miracle, the Marvel and the Genius: A Study of Autobiography, Psychology and Publicity in America, 1890-1940” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1997), 42.
hearing subject in her textual self-representation.” According to The Nation, Keller “had violated the fundamental premise of denominational language in writing about things she could not know directly, and had violated the basic rule of autobiography by presenting as her own the linguistic expressions of others’ sensory experiences.”

In this context, the conventionality – and even “illegitimacy” – of Keller’s language has largely been understood as a kind of defiant assertion of poetic license. “She was an artist. She imagined,” Cynthia Ozick writes. “Her common language was not with the man who crushed a child for memorizing what the fairies do, or with the carpers who scolded her for the crime of a literary vocabulary. She was a member of the race of poets, the Romantic kind; she was close cousin to those novelists who write not only what they do not know but what they cannot possibly know.”

And yet, I will suggest, to argue for Keller’s “right” to “imagine” is also to lose the meaning of her work. In Keller’s own moment, her language was understood as a plagiarism or as a feat of memory; Keller’s writing, I will argue, moves between these two poles. Indeed, it has hardly been noted that Keller herself foregrounds the very “illegitimate” use of language that marks her both as a “parrot” and a “wonder.” In order to fully take stock of Keller’s work, we too, I will suggest, have to read her writing in this fully double register: as both plagiarism and feat.

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92 Ibid.


94 Ibid.
II. A Psychological Autobiography

Keller’s second book, *The World I Live In* (1908), can be understood as a full-scale rebuttal to *The Nation’s* critique.\(^95\) Here Keller argued that her use of the language of sight and sound could be understood through the logic of what she called “correspondence.” Reprising the theme of the shipwrecked traveler, she writes:

Every object I think of is stained with the hue that belongs to it by association and memory. The experience of the deaf-blind person, in a world of seeing, hearing people, is like that of a sailor on an island where the inhabitants speak a language unknown to him, whose life is unlike that he has lived. He is one, they are many; there is no chance of compromise. He must learn to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears, to think their thoughts, to follow their ideals.

If the dark, silent world which surrounds him were essentially different from the sunlit, resonant world, it would be incomprehensible to his kind, and could never be discussed. … Since the mind of the sightless is essentially the same as that of the seeing in that it admits of no lack, it must supply some sort of equivalent for missing physical sensations. It must perceive a likeness between things outward and things inward, a correspondence between the seen and the unseen. I make use of such a correspondence in many relations, and no matter how far I pursue it to things I cannot see, it does not break under the test.\(^96\)

Keller must translate from her own experience into “a language unknown” – one built for a people “whose life is unlike that he has lived.” And yet, as she pointed out, though her language was perhaps irremediably “foreign,” she nevertheless *could* speak. Keller here figures the fact that she can communicate at all as evidence of the continuity between her own “dark, silent world” and “the sunlit, resonant world” of her presumed reader; if there were no such continuity, she notes, the topic simply “could never be discussed.”

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\(^95\) Many of chapters of *The World I Live In* had appeared in print in the intervening years.

\(^96\) Keller, *World*, 78.
The claim for a “correspondence” between her “world” and that of her reader was made in terms drawn from the psychology of imagination. Indeed, when William James, then at work on *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), read *The World I Live In*, he wrote to congratulate Keller. The work confirmed much of what he had argued in *Principles*:

I cannot forbear sending you a word of thanks for having written ‘the world I live in,’ and of praise for the success with which you have told so much truth about human nature which nobody had suspected. Evidently sensations as such form the relatively smaller part of the world we mentally live in, *relations* being the things of most interest there, and the whole spread & extent and interest consisting of material suggested and treated analogically, and being practically quite as vast in one person as in another, and similar in effects of contrast, etc., and in aesthetic and moral appeal in us all. I have found the book extraordinarily instructive.\(^7\)

In *Principles*, James drew upon the account of “a deaf and dumb man” in order to resolve the apparent “paradox” presented by Galton’s findings.\(^8\) Keller’s account only confirmed this insight. When Keller responded to James’s letter, he elaborated upon this point: “It is no paradox that you live in a world so indistinguishable from ours,” he writes.\(^9\) “It makes no difference in what shape the content of our verbal material may come. In some it is more optical, in others more acoustical, in others more motor in nature. In you it is motor and tactile, but its functions


\(^8\) James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 267. Ballard’s account, he wrote, proved that “it makes little or no difference in what sort of mind-stuff, in what quality of imagery, his thinking goes on. The only images *intrinsically* important are the halting-places, the substantive conclusions, provisional or final of the thought” (Ibid., 269). Ballard was a favorite of James’s. He also appears in James’s “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” (“Omissions,” 1006). William James, “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,” 1884, in *Writings 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers, 986-1013 (New York: The Library of America, 1992).

are the same as ours, the relations meant by the words symbolizing the relations existing between the things.”

Joseph Jastrow understood Keller in like terms. Echoing James’s well-known articulation of the “stream of thought,” Jastrow observed that Keller’s use of language proved that “whether we travel by train or by diligence or on foot, the destination is the same when reached. The one mode of conveyance is swift, the other cumbersome, the third arduous; each requires an equipment with which the others may dispense. For all the view from the mountain top is much the same, however wearisome the climb.”

This understanding of Keller’s psychology suggested a way of appraising Keller’s writing. In 1900, as Keller was composing The Story of My Life, she contributed a report to Jastrow for his study on “The Dreams of the Blind.” Keller’s account was peppered with perplexingly vivid sight and sound imagery – descriptions that seemed to exceed the reach of her possible experience – or more relevant, her possible imagination. Thus, for example, she told Jastrow,

‘One night I dreamed that I was in a lovely mansion, all built of leaves and flowers. My thoughts declared the floor was of green twigs, and the ceiling of pink and white roses. The walls were of roses, pinks, hyacinths, and many other flowers, loosely arranged so as

100 Ibid.

101 Joseph Jastrow, “Helen Keller: A Psychological Autobiography,” Popular Science 63 (May 19, 1903): 81. Thus, he wrote, though Keller’s writing made clear that “the deprivation of the two most intellectual of the senses leaves an indelible impress upon the habit and manners of the mind,” her work nevertheless demonstrated “the community of the mental economy as well of the material which it employs and of the language in which it finds expression” (“Psychological Autobiography,” 81). See also Joseph Jastrow, “Psychological Notes on Helen Kellar [sic],” Psychological Review 1, no. 4 (July 1894): 356-362.

102 In its first 1888 publication, “The Dreams of the Blind” addressed only Laura Bridgman’s account of her dream life – the article marks James’s first reference in his Imagination chapter in Principles. When, in 1900, the article was collected for Fact and Fable in Psychology, Jastrow asked Keller to contribute her own report. I discuss Fact and Fable at length in my first chapter. It should be noted too that Fact and Fable was Ludwig Wittgenstein’s source for his famous duck-rabbit (Wittgenstein, Investigations, 165).
to make the whole structure wavy and graceful. Here and there I saw an opening between the leaves, which admitted the purest air.”

Keller’s report anticipated the interpretive problems presented by Story. As Jastrow observed, “The wealth and brilliancy of her imagination frequently lead to modes of expression which seem to brusquely contradict her sightless and soundless condition.” And yet, as Jastrow pointed out, her comments were not so indecipherable as they might first appear; one could understand Keller’s references to sights and sounds if one took account of the “relations” that adhered between the senses. Thus, light could be “known” to her in “the heat sensations radiating from a brilliant illumination”; sound could be directly understood through “vibrational or jarring sensations communicated to the body.” Indeed, in the passage above, one need only replace the word “see” with “perceive” in order to understand the “opening in the leaves” as a gap in scent – an opening “which admitted the purest air.” Even Keller’s color language here might be interpreted in an alternate mode: “green twigs” might simply be young or fresh; “pink” roses might be of a different variety – and thus have a different odor – than white ones.

“This imaginative factor must be constantly borne in mind in reading her report of her dream life,” Jastrow wrote. From this perspective, he argued, what seemed potentially fantastic in Keller’s account could be understood as a faithful description of her imaginative experience. When Jastrow later reviewed The Story of My Life, he renamed the book a “Helen Keller: a psychological autobiography,” and advised the reader to take up a similar interpretive course; when reading her descriptions of light and sound, he suggested, “it should be recalled that they include sensations of temperature and – very important to the deaf – the impressions of jar or

104 Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 351.
105 Ibid., 359-60.
106 Ibid., 352.
vibration, which present a rich variety of distinctive qualities.”

In *The World I Live In*, Keller herself recommended precisely this mode of reading. As she admonished her (presumably-sighted, hearing) reader, if one were to understand her language, one must keep in mind how much visual, auditory experience could be fully re-described in other modalities: “Remember that you, dependent on your sight, do not realize how many things are tangible,” she writes.

All palpable things are mobile or rigid, solid or liquid, big or small, warm or cold, and these qualities are variously modified. The coolness of a water-lily rounding into bloom is different from the coolness of an evening wind in summer, and different again from the coolness of the rain that soaks into the hearts of growing things and gives them life and body. The velvet of the rose is not that of a ripe peach or of a baby’s dimpled cheek. The hardness of the rock is to the hardness of wood what a man’s deep bass is to a woman's voice when it is low. What I call beauty I find in certain combinations of all these qualities, and is largely derived from the flow of curved and straight lines which is over all things.

Indeed, as she pointed out, much of what otherwise seemed to be “illegitimate” in her language could be made comprehensible through thoughtful consideration of her own perceptual experience. “I have felt the flame of a candle blow and flutter in the breeze,” she writes. “May I not, then, say: ‘Myriads of fireflies flit hither and thither in the dew-wet grass like little fluttering tapers’?” If we read the sentence without Keller’s instruction and find it insufficiently experiential, Keller here reminds us that tapers do flutter, and that their movement is similar to that of fireflies – a “correspondence” not of light, but of motion. Though upon first reading, the

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109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 65-66.
language perhaps seems to evoke an impossibly visual scene – “fireflies,” “tapers” – upon reconsideration, one notes that there is no reference to light in this sentence at all: fireflies are just insects; the tapers can be re-described as a flickering heat; the grass is not green, but dew-wet.

In *The Story of My Life*, I will suggest, Keller prompts a similar style of “doubled” reading – one that involves a first pass and a second re-visititation, now with Keller’s perspective in mind. In an early review, a writer at *The Atlantic Monthly* described the experience of reading the autobiography:

> as one reads, one forgets to make allowances for limitations which are apt to slip out of sight, until a chance phrase recalls one with a start to the realization that the mind which deals so freely and so normally with the ordinary factors of human life dwells forever in silence and dark.111

Then, as now, the experience of reading *The Story of My Life* is one of double-take. Keller’s visual or auditory descriptions “slip” by until the reader is suddenly reminded that the words have been written by a woman who is blind and deaf. The moment of the “chance phrase” that “recalls one with a start” is one in which Keller’s perceptual “limitations” are brought to the foreground.

And yet, though many of Keller’s readers have remarked upon this effect, it has hardly been noted that Keller’s use of language in *The Story of My Life* seems quite clearly calculated to produce such moments of disruption – and so too, to bring the reader to a renewed cognizance of Keller’s “limitations.”112 As Keller admonished, she had been forced to assimilate herself to the conventions of a foreign people – forced to “learn to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears,

112 Mary Klages: “In writing *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller wrote herself into existence as a subject on equal terms with the sighted and hearing…. Keller’s polished prose style masked or belied her disabilities” (*Woeful*, 189-190).
to think in their language.” In *The Story of My Life*, I will argue, Keller demands that we too undertake the difficult task of translation – that we attempt to see with her eyes, hear with her ears, *to think in her language*.

As a reviewer for *The Independent* observed, *The Story of My Life* seemed to be “woven out of two strands; the one necessarily acquired at second hand, the other distinctly original and her own…” In order to illustrate these two distinct modes, *The Independent* annotated a short excerpt of Keller’s writing: the portion set in ordinary type indicated language that could only have been “acquired at second hand”; italics were used to indicate the portion of the paragraph that was “distinctly original and her own.” To appreciate Keller’s work, I will suggest, we must take up a style of reading similar to that of Keller’s critics, one in which we likewise attend to the “two strands.”

By way of example, let us turn to Keller’s description of snowfall – among the passages most frequently cited in negative reviews of *The Story of My Life*. The scene is worth reading once through in its entirety; I will presently return to many of its parts.

“I recall my surprise on discovering that a mysterious hand had stripped the trees and bushes, leaving only here and there a wrinkled leaf,” Keller begins.

The birds had flown, and their empty nests in the bare trees were filled with snow. Winter was on hill and field. The earth seemed benumbed by his icy touch and the very spirits of the trees had withdrawn to their roots, and there, curled up in the dark, lay fast asleep. All life seemed to have ebbed away, and even when the sun shone the day was

Shrunk and cold,

As if her veins were sapless and old,

And she rose up decrepitly

For a last dim look at earth and sea.

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113 “Miss Keller’s Autobiography,” unsigned review of *The Story of My Life, The Independent* (April 30, 1903): 1034. It should be noted that the review was generally positive.
The withered grass and the bushes were transformed into a forest of icicles.

Then came a day when the chill air portended a snowstorm. We rushed out-of-doors to feel the first few tiny flakes descending. Hour by hour the flakes dropped silently, softly from their airy height to the earth, and the country became more and more level. A snowy night closed upon the world, and in the morning one could scarcely recognize a feature of the landscape. All the roads were hidden, not a single landmark was visible, only a waste of snow with trees rising out of it.

In the evening a wind from the northeast sprang up, and the flakes rushed hither and thither in furious mêlée. Around the great fire we sat and told merry tales, and frolicked, and quite forgot that we were in the midst of a desolate solitude, shut in from all communication with the outside world. But during the night, the fury of the wind increased to such a degree that it thrilled us with a vague terror. The rafters creaked and strained, and the branches of the trees surrounding the house rattled and beat against the windows, as the winds rioted up and down the country.

On the third day after the beginning of the storm the snow ceased. The sun broke through the clouds and shone upon a vast, undulating white plain. High mounds, pyramids heaped in fantastic shapes, and impenetrable drifts lay scattered in every direction.

Narrow paths were shoveled through the drifts. I put on my cloak and hood and went out. The air stung my cheeks like fire. Half walking in the paths, half working our way through the lesser drifts, we succeeded in reaching a pine grove just outside a broad pasture. The trees stood motionless and white like figures in a marble frieze. There was no odour of pine-needles. The rays of the sun fell upon the trees, so that the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped in showers when we touched them. So dazzling was the light, it penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes.

As the days wore on, the drifts gradually shrunk, but before they were wholly gone another storm came, so that I scarcely felt the earth under my feet once all winter. At intervals the trees lost their icy covering, and the bulrushes and underbrush were bare; but the lake lay frozen and hard beneath the sun.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{114} Keller, \textit{Story}, Modern, 45-6.
Keller’s description of the snowy landscape may accurately conjure the scene that presented itself to her that day – a scene that Anne Sullivan, for example, might corroborate. But the description is presented from Keller’s perspective – not Sullivan’s – and is troubled by an understanding of Keller’s perceptual experience. By the end of the passage, Keller’s language is so thoroughly infused with auditory and visual metaphor – “the fury of the wind”; “rafters creaked and strained”; “rays of sun”; “twigs sparkled like diamonds”; a “dazzling” light – that the writing seems entirely un-tethered from her possible perception.

This is precisely the kind of “illegitimate” language that was often excerpted in Keller’s reviews, and the “two strands” of Keller’s writing follow hard upon one another here; indeed, in the very midst of most visual moment of the passage, Keller pointedly calls attention to the fact that she is blind:

The trees stood motionless and white like figures in a marble frieze. There was no odour of pine-needles. The rays of the sun fell upon the trees, so that the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped in showers when we touched them. [Italics mine.]

Here Keller’s vividly visual description of the “white” figures and twigs that “sparkled” is interrupted by a reminder of her particular attachment to scent – and so too of her blindness. The effect is one of puzzlement. The “chance phrase,” inserted in the midst of such a highly visual account, “recalls one with a start.” And yet, the juxtaposition, I would suggest, is not chance; indeed, the dissonance produced by this transition and others like it, I would argue, is central to the meaning of the passage.

Keller here produces what William James termed a “rat-trap.” In Principles of Psychology, James described the particular “affinity” shared by words of the same language. Thus, as James observes, if we begin a sentence in French, “our attention can hardly so wander
that if an English word be suddenly introduced we shall not start at the change.”115 He continues,

Usually the vague perception that all the words we hear belong to the same language and to the same special vocabulary in that language, and that the grammatical sequence is familiar, is practically equivalent to an admission that what we hear is sense. But if an unusual foreign word be introduced, if the grammar trip, or if a term from an incongruous vocabulary suddenly appear, such as ‘rat-trap’ or ‘plumber’s bill’ in a philosophical discourse, the sentence detonates, as it were, we receive a shock from the incongruity, and the drowsy assent is gone. The feeling of rationality in these cases seems rather a negative than a positive thing, being the mere absence of shock, or sense of discord, between the terms of thought.116

This “affinity” of words for one another, James suggested, accounted for the persistence of conventional language and cliché – examples of an almost too-powerful relation between words. As James pointed out, “if words do belong to the same vocabulary, and if the grammatical structure is correct, sentences with absolutely no meaning may be uttered in good faith and pass unchallenged.”117

Discourses at prayer-meetings, re-shuffling the same collection of cant phrases, and the whole genus of penny-a-line-isms and newspaper-reporter’s flourishes give illustrations of this. ‘The birds filled the tree-tops with their morning song, making the air moist, cool, and pleasant,’ is a sentence I remember reading once in a report of some athletic exercises in Jerome Park. It was probably written unconsciously by the hurried reporter, and read uncritically by many readers.118

“Bird song” does not of course make the air “moist.” But even given James’s implied warning that the sentence will not make sense, it is difficult to catch the error in the sentence without reading it twice. At the moment when one discovers the error however, one also understands the

115 James, Principles, vol. 1, 262.
116 Ibid., 262-3.
117 Ibid., 263.
118 Ibid.
particular power of such “relation”– written into the structure of language itself.

For James, as we have seen, similar moments of disruption and recursion were exceptionally important: one does not note the “stream” of one’s own thought until it goes awry. Indeed, James here includes a small demonstration of this principle within the text itself: *this* very “philosophical discourse” – the one we are reading at the moment – has suddenly been interrupted with “incongruous vocabulary”: the words “rat-trap” and “plumber’s bill.” In the momentary disruption, what is otherwise an imperceptible “background” feeling of relation becomes apparent – and is revealed to be the mechanism by which “rational” sense is made.

Keller, I will suggest, uses the language of sight and sound to produce similar moments of disruption. In the moment when one encounters a “chance phrase,” the reader is awoken from a state of “drowsy assent,” and is prompted to return to language that had, upon first reading, “slipped by” without remark. In the return, what had, upon first reading, seemed to be an “illegitimate” description of light, sound or distance, is now found to be perfectly “rational” in Keller’s own idiom of touch and motion. Let us revisit the passage above; take, for example, one of the scene’s most patently visual descriptions:

The sun broke through the clouds and shone upon a vast, undulating white plain. High mounds, pyramids heaped in fantastic shapes, and impenetrable drifts lay scattered in every direction.

Narrow paths were shoveled through the drifts. I put on my cloak and hood and went out. *The air stung my cheeks like fire. Half walking in the paths, half working our way through the lesser drifts, we succeeded in reaching a pine grove just outside a broad pasture. [Italics mine.]*

Here again the “legitimate” and the “illegitimate” are found at close quarters. If the description of the sun shining upon white mounds of snow “slipped by” upon first encounter, Keller’s tactile description of the air upon her cheeks serves as a reminder of her limited sensory perspective –
of her blind-deafness. The reader is brought up short; and is thus prompted to revisit the earlier phrase with renewed attention, now focalized through Keller’s experience. Though I, as a sighted reader, have a clear idea of “high mounds, pyramids heaped in fantastic shapes, and impenetrable drifts lay scattered in every direction,” what could such a description possibly mean when written by Keller?

And yet, with the important exception of the word “white” (which I will return to), one discovers that Keller’s description does not include any strictly visual language at all: “mounds,” “pyramids” and “shapes” are not necessarily visual features of the landscape, but could be known as inclines in the ground. The “vast, undulating” plain could be known as the feeling of walking at length over a series of hills. Indeed, Keller herself helps with this “translation” process: in the lines that follow, Keller provides a reminder of the way in which she might experience a snowy hill – in the physical effort required to “work” one’s way through “lesser drifts.” The link between light and temperature in the phrase “air… like fire” gives a clue to her understanding of sunshine, which might be known as a particular quality of warmth.¹¹⁹

The movement of this passage – one that includes a small revision of a first reading – repeats throughout the scene, which alternates between moments of alienation and moments of understanding, and back again. Notably, throughout the scene, the near entirety of Keller’s visual or auditory language – language that seems to be fully outside of Keller’s experience, and therefore hollowly conventional – is revealed, upon careful consideration, to be perceptible in other sensory modes. Keller describes the “fury of the wind” in auditory terms – the “rafters creaked and strained”; the branches “rattled and beat against the windows.” And yet, though

¹¹⁹ The force of association here – “like fire” – is almost so strong as to prompt the sense that Keller has used a color term here – that she has, in other words, said that her cheeks are red. Upon returning to the passage, one finds that there is no color at all in the line.
creaking, rattling and beating are evocations of sound, they are also descriptions of vibrations or movement. Her assertion that the “country became more and more level” might be understood as a visual description of a landscape blanketed by snow – but could also be read as an account of the physical angle of the ground; as she points out at the end of the passage, “I scarcely felt the earth under my feet once all winter.” Even her description of the snowflakes – dropping “silently, softly, from their airy height” – might be understood as grounded in tactile experience: what is the relation between silence and softness? Might they even perhaps be the same thing?

If the distinction between sound and vibration, heat and light, distance and felt-motion, is sometimes difficult to parse, this is, I would suggest, Keller’s very lesson. In these movements, the passage becomes a thoroughgoing instruction in the “correspondences” which, she said, governed “her” world as well as “our” own. “I understand how scarlet can differ from crimson because I know that the smell of an orange is not the smell of a grape-fruit,” Keller writes, in The World I Live In:

I can also conceive that colours have shades, and guess what shades are. In smell and taste there are varieties not broad enough to be fundamental; so I call them shades. There are half a dozen roses near me. They all have the unmistakable rose scent; yet my nose tells me that they are not the same. The American Beauty is distinct from the Jacqueminot and La France. Odours in certain grasses fade as really to my sense as certain colours do to yours in the sun. The freshness of a flower in my hand is analogous to the freshness I taste in an apple newly picked. I make use of analogies like these to enlarge my conceptions of colours. Some analogies which I draw between qualities in surface and vibration, taste and smell, are drawn by others between sight, hearing, and touch. This fact encourages me to persevere, to try and bridge the gap between the eye and the hand. … I also know what tones are, since they are perceptible tactually in a voice. Now, heat varies greatly in the sun, in the fire, in hands, and in the fur of animals; indeed, there is such a thing for me as a cold sun. … While I read the lips of a woman
whose voice is soprano, I note a low tone or a glad tone in the midst of a high, flowing voice. When I feel my cheeks hot, I know that I am red.120

As Keller observes, these “analogies of sense perception” are available not only to the blind-deaf, but may be “drawn by others.” Though the sighted and hearing may not consciously remark upon the particular heat upon the cheeks that marks the feeling of blushing, the way that scents may fade with time or weather, the particular temperature of a “cold sun,” these perceptions were not exclusive to Keller. As she often pointed out, she had no special access to an alternate universe – rather, she simply attended differently to the same sensory field that is presented to each of us.121 In puzzling over the meaning of Keller’s language, the reader is made aware of the potential impoverishment of his or her own experience – one that privileges sights and sounds to the exclusion of vibration, scent and warmth. In the process, Keller offers access to an authentically new register of perception, one in which the feeling of one’s cheeks, the incline of a hill, the scentlessness of the pines, becomes part of the “foreground” of experience.122

In this respect, I would suggest, Keller makes psychologically literal the poet’s claim to, in Wordsworth’s phrase, provide “authentic tidings of invisible things.” Indeed, Robert Lowell

120 Keller, World, 67-8.

121 “Critics delight to tell us what we cannot do. … When we consider how little has been found out about the mind, is it not amazing that any one should presume to define what one can know or cannot know? I admit that there are innumerable marvels in the visible universe unguessed by me. Likewise, O confident critic, there are a myriad sensations perceived by me of which you do not dream. … Nature accommodates itself to every man’s necessity. If the eye is maimed, so that it does not see the beauteous face of day, the touch becomes more poignant and discriminating. Nature proceeds through practice to strengthen and augment the remaining senses. For this reason the blind often hear with greater ease and distinctness than other people. The sense of smell becomes almost a new faculty to penetrate the tangle and vagueness of things. Thus, according to an immutable law, the senses assist and reinforce one another” (Keller, World, 29).

122 Thus, for example, though Laura Bridgman’s physical sense of smell was no better than anyone else’s, she was said to be able to sort laundry by the scent of its owner; anyone might acquire the skill with practice. Likewise, when tested in 1929, Keller was found to have no physically “expanded” sense of smell or touch. Rather, as Frederick Tilney noted, Keller was simply better at discerning fine distinctions in these sensory fields. “The case of Helen Keller demonstrates what a brain may do under the influence of concentrated, systematic attention” (“Comparative,” 1268). With “Practice! Practice! Practice!” any individual could acquire a similar perception (Ibid.). Frederick Tilney, “A Comparative Sensory Analysis of Helen Keller and Laura Bridgman,” A.M.A. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry 21 (June 1929): 1227-1269.
remarked upon the feel of a “cold sun” in “The Vision of Sir Launfal” – the poem that Keller excerpts at the beginning of the scene. And in this passage, I would argue, Keller offers the reader a poetic “perception” fully equivalent to Lowell’s own, though in a different mode.

Keller’s use of quotation here, and throughout The Story of My Life, is remarkably precise. Here again, is the opening of the passage:

> I recall my surprise on discovering that a mysterious hand had stripped the trees and bushes, leaving only here and there a wrinkled leaf. The birds had flown, and their empty nests in the bare trees were filled with snow. Winter was on hill and field. The earth seemed benumbed by his icy touch and the very spirits of the trees had withdrawn to their roots, and there, curled up in the dark, lay fast asleep. All life seemed to have ebbed away, and even when the sun shone the day was
> 
> Shrunken and cold,
> 
> As if her veins were sapless and old,
> 
> And she rose up decrepitly
> 
> For a last dim look at earth and sea.

> The withered grass and the bushes were transformed into a forest of icicles.

Keller’s passage begins in tactile and physical language that is easily assimilated to an understanding of her perceptual experience: the “wrinkled leaf”; the “icy touch”; a “benumbed” earth; the trees stripped “bare.” By the end of these first lines, however, Keller slips into a distinctly visual register: the roots are “curled up in the dark”; “the sun shone.” But Keller follows the visual language with Lowell’s poem. The implication is that Keller can go no further in her own “idiom,” and so must use another’s words.

Keller uses this strategy often. Thus, a few chapters later, she again quotes Lowell in a similar context. Describing a stay with a family in Wrentham, Massachusetts, Keller writes:

> Mr. Chamberlin initiated me into the mysteries of tree and wild-flower, until with the little ear of love I heard the flow of sap in the oak, and saw the sun glint from leaf to leaf.
Thus it is that

Even as the roots, shut in the darksome earth,
Share in the tree-top’s joyance, and conceive
Of sunshine and wide air and wingéd things,
By sympathy of nature, so do I
have evidence of things unseen.

It seems to me that there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning. Each individual has a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters, and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift from past generations. This inherited capacity is a sort of sixth sense – a soul-sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one.123

Keller’s use of visual and auditory language in the first line of the passage – the “sun glint from leaf to leaf” – was directly critiqued by The Nation, which offered the line as an example of the “second-hand descriptions of natural objects” that Keller had presented in her autobiography.124 The conventionality of Keller’s description – “the little ear of love” – is a mark of its “second-hand” quality: Keller cannot directly know what these phrases mean, and so the observation remains stuck in set, stock language.

And yet, here, as in the earlier passage, Keller’s “illegitimate” and conventional language is immediately followed by what amounts to a citation. The unattributed lines – in this case, from Lowell’s “The Cathedral” (1870) – repeat an aspect of Keller’s earlier observation: the poet’s evocation of the “sunshine” in the “tree-top” echoes Keller’s description of the sun’s “glint from leaf to leaf.” The lines thus serve as an implicit assertion of Keller’s right to use words in the same way as any other writer: If Lowell is able to speak of “the tree-top’s joyance” why should

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123 Keller, Story, Modern, 95.
124 Nation, 362.
Keller’s blindness and deafness limit her from such metaphorical language?

And yet, I will suggest, Keller is doing more here than asserting a “right.” Though the lines are unattributed, it is worth revisiting Lowell’s original poem; the portions marked in grey are not included in Keller’s excerpt, at right:

**LOWELL:**

O Power, more near my life than life itself
(Or what seems life to us in sense immured),
Even as the roots, shut in the darksome earth,
Share in the tree-top’s joyance, and conceive
Of sunshine and wide air and winged things
By sympathy of nature, so do I
Have evidence of Thee so far above,
Yet in and of me! Rather Thou the root
Invisibly sustaining, hid in light,
Not darkness, or in darkness made by us.

**KELLER:**

… ear of love I heard the flow of sap in the oak, and saw the sun glint from leaf to leaf. Thus it is that
Even as the roots, shut in the darksome earth,
Share in the tree-top’s joyance, and conceive
Of sunshine and wide air and wingéd things,
By sympathy of nature, so do I
have evidence of things unseen.

It seems to me that there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning.

Though Keller’s excerpt ends with the words “so do I,” the lines of the poem in fact bleed into her prose; Keller’s next line begins, like Lowell’s, with the phrase “have evidence of.” Indeed, I would suggest, Keller does not stop there, but continues the poem until the end of passage – though in an alternate register. Lowell’s spiritual evocation – “Thee so far above, / Yet in and of me!” – is here replaced with the phrase “things unseen.” In place of a “root / Invisibly

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sustaining,” Keller asserts a common inherited “capacity” for shared language: “a sort of sixth sense – a soul-sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one.”

In Keller’s hands, however, Lowell’s metaphoric language comes to be quite literal; here Keller re-frames Lowell’s romantic vision in the terms of psychology. Whereas in Lowell, the ability of a root to “conceive / Of sunshine” is the substance of a metaphor, Keller assimilates this poetic vision to her own literal capacity to in fact conceive of sunshine. Whereas Lowell tells the reader that he has been witness to “evidence of Thee so far above,” Keller’s claim to “have evidence of things unseen” refers simply to things she literally cannot see, such as “the sun glint from leaf to leaf.” Whereas Lowell asserts that he has felt a “root / Invisibly sustaining,” in Keller’s revision of the same line, her own experience is figured as a manifest demonstration of the principle: indeed, the “soul-sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one” can be understood as something psychologically accurate for Keller, who does in fact experience “seeing” and “hearing” as translations of tangible feeling.

In this respect, I would suggest, Keller’s use of poetic citation does not function as an assertion of the right to speak in language beyond her experience – to speak, in Ozick’s phrase, of things she “cannot possibly know.” In The Story of My Life, Keller does not draw upon the authority of the poetic in order to certify her experience. Rather, the meaning of her writing cuts in precisely the opposite direction: Keller draws upon the authority of experience – hers, and the reader’s – in order to certify the poetic. That is to say, the primary function of the quotation in

126 Keller, Story, Modern, 95.
this passage is not to offer a kind of “backing” for Keller’s otherwise unfounded assertions; rather, she herself provides a “backing” for the quotation. Let us return to the snow passage, now with Lowell’s poem in hand. Here again, are the first lines:

**LOWELL:**

I.
There was never a leaf on bush or tree,
The bare boughs rattled shudderingly;
The river was dumb and could not speak,
For the frost’s swift shuttles its shroud had spun;

A single crow on the tree-top bleak
From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun;
Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,
As if her veins were sapless and old,
And she rose up decrepitly
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

**KELLER:**

I recall my surprise on discovering that a mysterious hand had stripped the trees and bushes, leaving only here and there a wrinkled leaf. The birds had flown, and their empty nests in the bare trees were filled with snow. Winter was on hill and field. The earth seemed benumbed by his icy touch and the very spirits of the trees had withdrawn to their roots, and there, curled up in the dark, lay fast asleep. All life seemed to have ebbed away, and even when the sun shone the day was Shrunken cold,

As if her veins were sapless and old,
And she rose up decrepitly
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

When Keller breaks into Lowell’s words, his unattributed stanza precisely repeats the movement of Keller’s first paragraph. Lowell’s excerpt begins in a “tactile” register (“shrunk and cold”) and moves to the visual (the “dim look at earth and sea”). The metaphorical transition within the excerpted poem thus mirrors Keller’s own leap from “wrinkled leaf” to a description of a day on which the sun shone, but life seemed to have “ebbed away.”

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127 Lowell, *Poetical Works*. Notably, Keller’s first paragraph presents a direct echo of even Lowell’s absent lines. Lowell’s evocation of the “bare boughs” – no “leaf on bush or tree” – is repeated in Keller’s description of the “bare trees,” the “stripped” “trees and bushes.”
The quotation is first, then, offered as a kind of defiance: if Lowell, a poet, was permitted to metaphorically associate cold with darkness, why not allow Keller the same artistic freedom? And yet, if Lowell’s lines seem to serve first as a license for Keller’s *metaphoric* transition between ice and dark, by the end of the passage, we have been reminded of the *actual, experiential* link between temperature and light. Indeed, as we have seen, over the course of the passage, Keller grounds Lowell’s poetic evocation – what had seemed to be mere associative metaphor – in *perceptible* homologies of sensory experience: a “cold sun,” a “shuddering rattle,” a “dim look,” a “dumb river.”

“Of what use are such records as these?” asked *The Nation*. “One resents the pages of second-hand descriptions of natural objects.” And indeed, Keller’s description of “the glint from leaf to leaf” tells the reader little about leaves. But as I have suggested, leaves are not the important “natural object” in the passage, nor is the plain of snow. Rather, the *quotation itself* is the field upon which the passage registers its meaning. One has no way of verifying Keller’s description – against Sullivan’s account, or against the day: it could be entirely fiction. And yet, what *is* verified here, in the reader’s own register of experience, is Lowell’s vision. *The poem is the thing that gets tethered down* – not in reference to Keller’s perception, but in reference to one’s own.

Lowell’s “cold sun,” Keller reminds us, is more than a metaphor. Over the course of the passage, light is discovered to be perceptible in the waves of temperature; sound in the tactile waves of vibration; distance in the bodily waves of movement. As Keller explained, “What I call beauty I find in certain combinations of all these qualities, and is largely derived from the flow of

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128 *Nation*, 362.
curved and straight lines which is over all things.” Keller, Ozick writes, teaches us that “physics cannot cage metaphor.” And yet, I would suggest, Keller’s lesson is in fact precisely the opposite. Physics, rather, is a form of metaphor; and metaphor, reciprocally, is found to be rooted in the facts of the physical: in psychology, perception and nature itself. The poet was right: flax is blue.

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I would now like to return to some of the unresolved questions presented by Keller’s description of the snowy landscape. Indeed, though I have argued that the passage becomes an instruction in sensory correspondence, in its final turn, Keller presents the reader with a form of enigma:

The trees stood motionless and white like figures in a marble frieze. There was no odour of pine-needles. The rays of the sun fell upon the trees, so that the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped in showers when we touched them. So dazzling was the light, it penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes.

Ozick has described Keller as an “ungraspable organism” and Keller’s language here does indeed take on a quality of inviolable inscrutability. Though one may make the attempt to “translate” this sentence, Keller’s meaning remains obscure. Could “white” be a form of scentlessness? It may be that “sparkling” has something to do with the quality of water, dropping “in showers,” but it is hard to know. As a whole, the passage takes the form of a series of dissonances which are then “resolved” – but in this final moment, Keller’s language remains opaque, and in fact, indecipherable. Indeed, whereas the entire passage is grounded in descriptions of the outwardly perceptible scene – the snow, the sun, the trees – now Keller moves

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130 Ozick, “What Helen Keller Saw.”
131 Ibid.
to a fully interior register. Keller here makes an assertion for a kind of sight, though of what kind, remains unclear: Is she being literal or metaphorical when she says that the light “penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes”? What is this “darkness” and what is this “light”? What does she mean?

In The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), James described the paradoxical language that often accompanied spiritual encounters: “In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as ‘dazzling obscurity,’ ‘whispering silence,’ ‘teeming desert,’ are continually met with,” James observes. Though the phrases are themselves nonsensical, there is a “verge of mind which these things haunt,” he writes. Keller, I will suggest, repeatedly brings the reader to acquaintance with this “verge of mind” – not as a matter of understanding, but as a first-hand experience of the limits of the imagination. Indeed, the cognitive impossibility of resolving Keller’s meaning in this line, marks one of the passage’s – and the book’s – most important, and abiding, effects.

Notably, Keller foregrounds, and even insists upon, her own opacity in this moment; in the climax of the scene, Keller renders herself other, strange, foreign. Throughout her writing, Keller’s style is marked by the introduction of similar moments of opacity. To give a sense of this, I will examine a pair of passages – both critiqued by reviewers – taken from two points in her long career as a writer: the first, from an account written for the children’s magazine, St. Nicholas, when she was only 13; the second from Keller’s later memoir, Midstream (1929). First, the piece for St. Nicholas, describing a trip to the World’s Fair:

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132 Even if one were to ask her, could she ever communicate the answer to one with sight? The assertion is resistant to amelioration by “correspondence” or analogy – there is no way to ask what this light is like.


134 Ibid.
We approached the White City for the first time from the lake side, and got our first impression of the Fair from the peristyle. It was a bright, clear day; the sky and water were a perfect blue, making a most beautiful setting for the Dream City, crowned by the glistening dome of the Administration Building. Then we moved slowly up the Court of Honor, pausing every now and then while the teacher described the beautiful scene to me: the groups of noble buildings; the lagoons dotted with fast-moving boats; the stately statue of the Republic; the fluted columns of the peristyle; and, beyond, the deep, deep blue lake. Oh, how wonderful it all was! …

The burning sun, as he sank westward in his golden car, threw a soft rosy light over the White City, making it seem more than ever like Fairyland. When it was quite dark the illuminations began, and the fountains were all lighted up. Teacher described everything to me so vividly and clearly that it seemed as if I could really see the wonderful showers of light dart up into the sky, tremble there for an instant, sink and fall, like starts, into the depths of the lake.¹³⁵

The passage begins in vividly visual language: the “bright, clear day,” the “perfect blue” of the sky and water, capped by a “glistening dome.” The conventionality of Keller’s description – the “Dream city” of “Fairyland” – is a sign of the fact that the language can only in some way be second-hand. Upon reading this passage, in 1930, the writer Pierre Villey argued that Keller was “constantly the dupe of words, or rather the dupe of her dreams.”¹³⁶ “Pages of this kind,” he said, “perplex readers anxious to get at the inner thoughts of Helen Keller.”¹³⁷ The effect, Villey observed, is that Keller’s language takes on a quality of extraordinary hollowness: “words and emotions are used without troubling about the sensations themselves, giving the idea of the

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¹³⁵ Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller, “Helen Keller’s Visit to the World’s Fair,” St. Nicholas 21, no. 2 (December 1893), 176.

¹³⁶ Villey, World, 313. Villey himself lost sight at the age of four and a half.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 314. Villey argues that Keller seems to be living in the “Fairyland” that she evokes. Indeed, her language is so bound in conventionally visual figures of speech here that it seems utterly disconnected from any sense of her possible experience – and ultimately, “prove to us that she does not distinguish between sentiments suggested to her by words and sentiments inspired by sensations” (Ibid.).
existence of sensations which do not exist. They are, as it were, working with nothing behind them."

I would like to point out, however, that the structure of the passage suggests that it has been designed to elicit Villey’s very response. Notably, Keller’s evocative language in this passage is followed by an implied statement about its source: “the teacher described the beautiful scene to me.” The parallelism between Keller’s language before “teacher described” and after suggests that Keller’s visual language is directly drawn from Sullivan’s description. Here is the passage again, with the key phrase marked:

We approached the White City for the first time from the lake side, and got our first impression of the Fair from the peristyle. It was a bright, clear day; the sky and water were a perfect blue, making a most beautiful setting for the Dream City, crowned by the glistening dome of the Administration Building. Then we moved slowly up the Court of Honor, pausing every now and then while the teacher described the beautiful scene to me: the groups of noble buildings; the lagoons dotted with fast-moving boats; the stately statue of the Republic; the fluted columns of the peristyle; and, beyond, the deep, deep blue lake. Oh, how wonderful it all was!

In the second half of the passage, Keller’s paraphrase of Sullivan’s account of the “deep, deep blue lake” directly echoes her earlier observation that the “sky and water were a perfect blue.” The repetition of the word “peristyle” – before and after – further reinforces the sense that Keller has, in the first part of the passage, drawn her language from Sullivan. In fact, Keller makes this before-after movement twice over the course of the passage: Keller’s description of the “golden car” with its “soft rosy light” and the “fountains all lighted up,” is followed by a reminder that

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138 Ibid., 313.
Sullivan is present: “Teacher described everything to me so vividly and clearly.” And again Sullivan’s implied description of “wonderful showers of light” is an echo of Keller’s own.\(^\text{139}\)

The use of the phrase “teacher described” thus re-orient s Keller’s initial claim to “see,” locating it not in direct observation, but in another person’s description – in this case Sullivan’s. In this respect, Keller grounds her language in a form of experience – *not an experience of the scene itself, but an experience of another text*. She did not perhaps perceive the “perfect blue” in the scene that presented itself to her, but she did find it in Sullivan’s language: Here, she suggests, is where I acquired this association.

Keller herself thus highlights the ways in which her own claim to perceive the “blue” was in fact “plagiaristic” – an account gleaned only through the language of others. The effect is theatrical: in the first pass, Keller performs a kind of “act” of reading the scene; once Sullivan’s presence is introduced, the mechanism behind the “trick” is revealed. The conventionality only heightens this effect: Keller here seems to be producing a kind of simulacrum of language, a description of a description.

A similar passage – and pattern – appears in *Midstream*, written more than thirty years later. Keller here recalls a trip she made with Sullivan and Alexander Graham Bell:

I remember an evening in Pittsburgh when we drove along the embankment of the river to see the spectacular display of fireworks when the furnaces made their periodic runs. I shall never forget how excited Dr. Bell was when the show began. We were chatting about the enormous industries which make Pittsburgh one of the great cities of the world when Dr. Bell jumped up exclaiming, ‘The river is on fire!’ Indeed, the whole world appeared to be on fire. Out of the big, red, gaping mouths of the furnaces leaped immense

\(^{139}\) Here is this passage again, with the key phrase marked: “The burning sun, as he sank westward in his golden car, threw a soft rosy light over the White City, making it seem more than ever like Fairlyand. When it was quite dark the illuminations began, and the fountains were all lighted up. *Teacher described everything to me so vividly and clearly* that it seemed as if I could really see the wonderful showers of light dart up into the sky, tremble there for an instant, sink and fall, like starts, into the depths of the lake.”
streams of flame which seemed to fan the very clouds into billows of fire. Around the huge shaft-necks of the furnaces they flung rosy arms. As the columns ascended, the stars blushed as if a god had kissed them. The shoulder of the moon turned pink as she threw a scarlet scarf over her head. More and more curtains of scarlet, crimson, and red gold unroll, cloud mixes with cloud, fold tangles in fold, until the sky is an undulating sea of flame. Miss Sullivan and Dr. Bell spell into my hands, again and again erasing their words, searching their memories for phrases and similes to describe the scene. ‘A cataract of pink steam!’ one would say, ‘it bubbles and drips through the air’ “There goes a crimson geyser licking up the night I’ said the other. ‘A molten rod of hot iron ducks into a black hole like a rabbit.’ ‘There are silvery grottoes and caves of ebony and abysses of blackness beyond the river bank.’ ‘The belching furnace must be part of the central fires of earth.’ Every few seconds there was a flare of fiery cinders resembling ‘Greek Fire.’ Between the red flames and the black wall of the furnace moved the shadowy forms of men, the slaves of the insatiable beast which roared into darkness and spread flamingo wings upon the night.140

Keller’s description of the fireworks is deeply inflected with cliché and conventional language – a mark of the ways in which her language is limned by her experience. The objection here could be stated in simple terms: as one reviewer complained, “‘The shoulder of the moon turned pink as she threw a scarlet scarf over her head.’ But Miss Keller has never seen the moon and never seen a scarf. She doesn’t know what pink is.”141 Notably, however, Keller’s use of visual language here is again framed by an acknowledgement of its source: Dr. Bell and Miss Sullivan, who “spell into my hands, again and again erasing their words.” As in her report to St. Nicholas, the movement of the passage takes the form of an “act” of perception: her first description only later revealed to be drawn from Bell and Sullivan, who have attempted to translate the visual scene into an “idiom” that Keller might understand.

141 Quoted in Lash, Helen, 565. Review by Alice Beal Parsons, Books.
Responding to Keller’s writing in 1933, the psychologist Thomas Cutsforth suggested that this performance in writing represented an “implied chicanery.”142 Though Keller’s description “conveys the conventional meaning to the average reader,” he wrote, her language nevertheless “represents a set of ideas entirely different from the objective reality expressed in the sentences, which represent as nearly as possible what the experience would be to those who both see and hear.”143 Keller’s language was, in effect, a counterfeit:

The words and sentences are intelligently structured so that the average reader will recognize meanings and situations that are common to him and his fellows, but relations and situations from which the writer is excluded.144

As William James observed, in “The Stream of Thought,” “if words do belong to the same vocabulary, and if the grammatical structure is correct, sentences with absolutely no meaning may be uttered in good faith and pass unchallenged.”145 Cutsforth here characterizes Keller’s writing as a form of similar “nonsense” – “intelligently structured,” perhaps, but fundamentally duplicitous, a “counterfeit” language that “passes” for good currency.

142 Thomas D. Cutsforth, The Blind in School and Society: A Psychological Study (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1933), 52. Cutsforth, like Pierre Villey, was also blind himself; he lost his sight at age 11. Villey and Cutsforth, though critical of Keller, made their critique in the service of the rights of the disabled. Both argued that blind people’s genuine experience be brought to the forefront; the blind should not present themselves as a “likeness” of a sighted person. Blind people can’t “see” statues, Villey argued; don’t ask them to. Similarly, Cutsforth explained that, to the blind, sheep are not white, but complex, grotesque touch objects – woolly, drooling, strange. Klages, though defensive of Keller, nevertheless seems to sign on with Villey and Cutsforth in suggesting that Keller contributed to the idea that the ideal blind person would be one who “passes” for sighted.

143 Cutsforth, Blind, 52. In addition, Cutsforth cited a second example of “implied chicanery”; though Cutsforth does not note it, Keller here too uses the technique I have been describing, inserting the phrase “Teacher said” about halfway through. Cutsforth’s quotation, with my italics:

The following paragraph written by Helen Keller illustrates the facility with which she is able to express and socialize that which she herself cannot possibly experience: ‘We followed a tributary of the Tamar, which we glimpsed through a mist of green. The trees were just budding. The willows were already in leaf, and I could smell the virgin grass and reeds— a tide of green advancing upon the silver-grey stream. It was misting, and soft clouds were tumbling over each other in the sky which, Teacher said, had the effect of intensifying the greenness until the land seemed a great emerald. Soon we passed the stream and went speeding between grassy hedges thick with primroses and violets. I had to get out of the car half a dozen times to feel the blue pools of dogviolets and the cascades of golden primroses.’ (Cutsforth, Blind, 51-52)

144 Ibid., 52.

145 James, Principles, vol. 1, 263.
But these readings, I would suggest, profoundly miss the meaning of the performance. As Keller’s editor on *Midstream* noted, Keller’s descriptions were among “the most pictorially effective that I ever remember to have read.” Indeed, the very idea that Keller’s language evokes sensations “working with nothing behind them,” is a testament to its uncanny *efficacy* in producing “pictures” and “sounds” for her sighted and hearing readers. “The shoulder of the moon turned pink as she threw a scarlet scarf over her head. More and more curtains of scarlet, crimson, and red gold unroll, cloud mixes with cloud, fold tangles in fold, until the sky is an undulating sea of flame,” Keller writes. The question ‘What is she referring to?’ begins in a consciousness of the images that oneself produced upon reading the lines; the feeling that there is a gulf between Keller’s “vision” and one’s own here necessarily involves an assessment of two terms: what Keller “saw” and what oneself “saw.” The complaint leveled at such descriptions thus amounts to a tacit acknowledgement of the ways in which Keller’s language worked *in spite of* its disconnection – an acknowledgement that it did *in fact produce a vivid image in one’s own mind.*

Indeed, the same complaint could be inverted. Writing of Keller’s *The Song of the Stone Wall* (1910), one reviewer marveled at “the exactness of impression, the perfect sense of reality” in Keller’s writing: “how shall one convey a perfect illusion of these things when they exist for him only in imagination, and how shall one imagine that for which he has no reality, no association in fact?” In acknowledging the source of her language to be another person’s language, Keller foregrounds the ways in which her own words are a “copy” or a “show” – divorced from first-hand experience. And yet, the feeling that she has performed a *feat* of

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146 Quoted in Lash, *Helen*, 564.

language – that her words have functioned in spite of their hollowness, in spite of the fact that they have no backing – produces its signature hallucinatory effect. That is to say, the fact that the language first “passes” without any reference in experience – that it makes sense, that it vividly conjures images and sounds for the reader – also produces a sense of wonder: the marvel that it is a “perfect illusion.”

It is impossible to know precisely what Keller means when she writes that the “the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped in showers when we touched them.” She may be simply parroting Sullivan’s words (or someone else’s, for that matter); but if, in this moment, one censures Keller for exceeding the bounds of her sensory perception, the very critique reminds us that the familiar act of reading is founded upon precisely the same kind of experiential “speculation.” What can she mean? one asks. But the irresolvable puzzlement raised by the description also brings the reader to an acknowledgment of the hallucinatory nature of his or her own “vision.” In the final moment of the snow passage, Keller’s exalted form of poetic “seership” is one with which the reader is made directly acquainted – assimilated to the mysterious, but ordinary fact of reading itself.

Indeed, in these moments, the reader’s “vision” is revealed to be as un-tethered as Keller’s own. “Teacher described everything to me so vividly and clearly that it seemed as if I could really see the wonderful showers of light dart up into the sky,” Keller writes. Over the course of the passage, the statement comes to be applicable to the reader as well – but with Keller now in the place of Sullivan. Keller has now “described everything … so vividly and clearly that it seemed as if I could really see the wonderful showers of light dart up into the sky.” The sense that Keller has, in effect, made you look, is offered as a kind of demonstration of faith
before the fact: testament to the possibility that Keller herself may likewise claim to a real form of “sight” – one evoked through words alone.

In this respect, I would suggest, Keller precisely inverts the paradigm presented by Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier*. Michaels’s argument emerges from a famous thought experiment, first articulated in “Against Theory,” an essay he co-authored with Steven Knapp (1982).148 “Suppose that you’re walking along a beach and you come upon a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand,” they write.

You step back a few paces and notice that they spell out the following words:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
   I had no human fears:
   She seemed a thing that could not feel
   The touch of earthly years.149

As you “stand gazing at this pattern in the sand,” another wave washes up a second stanza.150 “Are these marks mere accidents, produced by the mechanical operation of the waves on the sand (through some subtle and unprecedented process of erosion, percolation, etc.)? Or is the sea alive and striving to express its pantheistic faith?” they ask.151 Insofar as the marks “seem to be accidents,” Michaels and Knapp argue, the marks will “cease to be words.”152 Rather, “they will merely seem to resemble words.”153

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148 Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 723-747. The exercise is one in which we are asked to “imagine a case of intentionless meaning” (Knapp and Michaels, 727). The same thought experiment appears in Michaels’s *The Shape of the Signifier* (56).


150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., 728.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.
embossed print familiar to the blind, followed immediately. This was succeeded within three years by her acquiring (1890), through the special instruction of Miss Sarah Fuller, the ability to speak orally, or “talk with her mouth,” as she designated speech, an achievement she had insisted on learning, and which afforded her unbounded delight. The art of using an ordinary typewriter had

![Helen's first composition](image)

meanwhile also been accomplished. Helen then briefly relates how Miss Fuller taught her to speak:

> She passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. I was eager to imitate every motion, and in an hour had learned six elements of speech.

M. P. A. S. T. I. Miss Fuller gave me eleven lessons in all. I shall

*Figure 8.* “Helen’s first composition,” from “Helen Keller,” *American Anthropologist* (April - June 1906).

As we have seen, Keller presents us with a series of fragmented poems – Lowell’s and her own – “washed up” on the beach of her text. In the moment that we *read* those words, however, we *render* them language – and so too infer an intelligence behind them. If, as Knapp and Michaels suggest, this inference requires a leap of faith – into the “pantheistic” or the “ghostly” – Keller, I have argued, exploits this effect as well. In fact, it is the very difficulty of accounting for our belief in her language that pushes us toward the language of “miracle” – that is to say, the term for the thing that cannot be rationally described, but that nevertheless can be witnessed.
After reading *The World I Live In*, James recommended the book to the psychologist Giulio Cesare Ferrari: the book, he told Ferrari, was written by “our blind-deaf-mute Helen Keller, who has a genius for using the english language and who proves, it seems to me, that all our senses lead into the same world of imagination and intellecction, which our spirit inhabits.”

Notably, it is our own participation – our own conversion – of the lines that produces their meaning. As Keller pointed out, the very fact that she could communicate with her reader – her very use of “the english language” – was itself irrefutable evidence of a shared mental inheritance. If there is a universal order, a “pantheistic” presence revealed in Keller’s writing, that order is also discovered to be in oneself: living “evidence of Thee so far above, / Yet in and of me!”

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CODA

On a Certain Blindness

In the Supplement to *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller’s many unconscious plagiarisms are printed next to their original source texts. (*Figure 1.*) As Anne Sullivan explained, the two texts were provided “so that the likenesses and differences may be studied by those interested in the subject.”¹ “The differences,” she noted, “are as important as the resemblances.”² The arrangement suggests a form of reading as “checking” – one column as copy, one as original; one column in Keller’s “idiom,” one in English; one written by a deaf-blind woman, one by a writer gifted with sight and hearing. Looking back upon the columns, set side by side on the page, it is clear that it is a model appropriate not only to plagiarism, but to translation. It is a reading we might literally call comparative – back and forth across the texts, attentive to small differences and cognitive incongruities.³ As I hope I have demonstrated, it is the kind of reading that Keller requires.

¹ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life (with her letters 1887-1901 and a supplementary account of her education, including passages from the reports and letters of her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, by John Albert Macy)* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), 403.
² Ibid., 406.
³ In the 2004 Modern Library Classics Restored Edition of *The Story of My Life*, James Berger, the editor, removed a number of letters that, he writes, “seemed to me redundant” (“Note,” xil). He also cut Macy’s brief biography of Sullivan, as well as “some of Macy’s comments on the subject of Helen’s efforts to learn to speak that largely repeat material covered in Keller’s memoirs and letters” (Ibid.). Keller’s plagiarized story is not printed in full, as it was in the original edition. Though Berger is surely correct to presume that few readers will in fact find much of this repetitive, these excisions are problematic: in order to read Keller properly one must attend precisely to the seeming *redundancies* of her text – its recursions and revisions. James Berger, “A Note on the Text,” in *The Story of My Life (with her letters 1887-1901 and a supplementary account of her education, including passages from her reports and letters of her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, by John Albert Macy)*, by Helen Keller, xxxix-xl (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), xxxix-xl.
King Winter, a cross and choleric old monarch, who is hard and cruel, and delights in making the poor suffer and weep; but the other neighbour is Santa Claus, a fine, good-natured, jolly old soul, who loves to do good, and who brings presents to the poor, and to nice little children at Christmas.

Well, one day King Frost was trying to think of some good that he could do with his treasure; and suddenly he concluded to send some of it to his kind neighbour, Santa Claus, to buy presents of food and clothing for the poor, that they might not suffer so much when King Winter went near their homes. So he called together his merry little fairies, and showing them a number of jars and vases filled with gold and precious stones, told them to carry those carefully to the palace of Santa Claus, and give them to him with the compliments of King Frost. “He will know how to make good use of the treasure,” added Jack Frost; then he told the fairies not to loiter by the way, but to do his bidding quickly.

The fairies promised obedience and soon started on their journey, dragging the great glass jars and vases along, as well as they could, and now and then grumbling a little at having such hard work to do, for they were idle fairies, and liked play better than work. At last they reached a great forest, and, being quite tired, they decided to rest awhile and look for nuts before going any further. But lest the treasure should be stolen from them, they hid the jars among the thick leaves of the forest trees, placing some high up near the top, and others in different parts of the various trees, until they thought no one could find them.

Then they began to wander about and hunt for nuts, and climb the trees to shake them down, and worked much harder for their own pleasure than they had done for their master’s bidding, for it is a strange truth that fairies and children never complain of the toil and trouble they take in search of amusement, although they often grumble when asked to work for the good of others.

The frost fairies were so busy and so merry over their nutting frolic that they soon forgot their errand and their king’s command to go quickly; but, as they played and loitered in the forest until noon, they found the reason why they were told to hasten; for although they had, as they “I will send my treasures to Santa Claus,” said the King to himself. “He is the very man to dispose of them satisfactorily, for he knows where the poor and the unhappy live, and his kind old heart is always full of benevolent plans for their relief.” So he called together the merry little fairies of his household and, showing them the jars and vases containing his treasures, he bade them carry them to the palace of Santa Claus as quickly as they could. The fairies promised obedience, and were off in a twinkling, dragging the heavy jars and vases along after them as well as they could, now and then grumbling a little at having such a hard task, for they were idle fairies and loved to play better than to work. After awhile they came to a great forest and, being tired and hungry, they thought they would rest a little and look for nuts before continuing their journey. But thinking their treasure might be stolen from them, they hid the jars among the thick green leaves of the

Figure 1. Two pages comparing Margaret Canby’s “The Frost Fairies” (left columns) and Keller’s “The Frost King” (right columns), included in the Supplement to The Story of My Life (1903).
By her own account, Keller was trapped “in a tower of Babel” and resigned too to translate from her own “dumb hieroglyphics” into the language of the sighted and hearing: “I must learn to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears, to think in their language, and I bent all my energies to the task,” she writes. And yet, as Keller repeatedly demonstrates, though her language may be a form of “hieroglyphics” – though she herself may be unassailably “foreign” – her words nevertheless do make sense; across the column gutter, even in spite of ourselves, we make the leap.

It is, William James reminds us, a leap of faith. “I open and show you a book, uttering certain sounds the while,” James wrote. As he pointed out, though we may instinctively believe that “the book is one book felt in both our worlds” – though this belief was, in fact, the very premise of our reading at all – we “never can be sure.” Rather, it would always remain a matter of “hope and trust.” As Keller continually instructs us, we are each daily tasked with an act of similar faith: the faith that makes us believe that the person across from us is neither a speaking parrot, nor an “imitation” of a “splendid woman with speech,” but, rather, shares a subjectivity equivalent to our own.

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 844. Lecturing more than twenty years later, James reprised the demonstration, reminding his audience that “this very desk which I strike with my hand strikes in turn your eyes” (Pluralistic, 753). And yet, though the statement was self-certifying, the observation nevertheless presented a paradox; it was, he noted, a philosophic “absurdity” to claim that the desk was both “a physical object in the outer world” and “a mental object in our sundry mental worlds” – that the desk was in two minds, and yet one desk, in James’s consciousness as well as in that of his listeners (Ibid.). And yet, he urged, “the actual cannot be impossible, and what is actual at every moment of our lives is the sort of thing which I now proceed to remind you of” (Ibid.). William James, A Pluralistic Universe, 1909, in Writings 1902-1910, ed. Bruce Kuklick, 625-820 (New York: The Library of America, 1987).
In *The Story of My Life*, Keller ends her autobiography with a scene in which she too opens and shows a book. “I remember the first time I saw Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes,” she writes.⁸

He invited Miss Sullivan and me to call on him one Sunday afternoon. It was early in the spring, just after I learned to speak. We were shown at once to his library where we found him seated in a big armchair by an open fire which glowed and crackled on the hearth, thinking, he said, of other days.

‘And listening to the murmur of the River Charles,’ I suggested.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘the Charles has many dear associations for me.’ There was an odour of print and leather in the room which told me that it was full of books, and I stretched out my hand instinctively to find them. My fingers lighted upon a beautiful volume of Tennyson’s poems, and when Miss Sullivan told me what it was I began to recite:

*Break, break, break*

*On thy cold gray stones, O sea!*

But I stopped suddenly. I felt tears on my hand. I had made my beloved poet weep, and I was greatly distressed. He made me sit in his armchair, while he brought different interesting things for me to examine, and at his request I recited ‘The Chambered Nautilus,’ which was then my favorite poem. After that I saw Dr. Holmes many times and learned to love the man as well as the poet.⁹

When, as a child, Keller guessed at the color of the flax, she was wrong; in this scene, the conventional language does not lead her astray. Though she cannot know just what “the murmur of the River Charles” means to Holmes, she nevertheless uses the language accurately here – not only as a description of the river, but as a means of sympathetically evoking Holmes’s recollection of “other days.”


⁹ Ibid.
Still, Keller’s use of the language seems theatrical. When Sullivan draws out a book—one which Keller herself cannot read in the moment, as it is not in Braille or raised-print—Keller nevertheless performs an “act” of reading, speaking the poem from memory. But it is Keller’s very inability to read the book in the moment—that is to say, the reading as a mere performance—that makes the action meaningful. Keller’s insensitivity to the book renders it into a set of mute pages in the hand, a dumb thing—“dumb” that is, until she makes it speak.

The mysterious—and in fact, unfounded—transformation alludes to her own transformation as well, from dumb to speaking, from “no world” to this one. Here is the original text of the poem—the lines in gray are not included in Keller’s quotation:

*Break, break, break,*

*On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!*

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

Presumably Keller may have chosen any lines from any of Tennyson’s poems (the poem need not even be in the book, in fact); but here she chooses a passage that evokes the movement of water upon a stone. The quotation reinforces the analogy between the conversion of the book, and her own moment of “conversion”: she herself, in an encounter with water, was transformed from a dumb thing, into something that speaks. Indeed, the reference is two-fold: in the very use of the language itself, Keller testifies to the very conversion to which she alludes. Keller can

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11 Keller uses the trope of the “speaking stone” elsewhere as well. In *The Song of the Stone Wall* (1910), she writes, “Come walk with me, and I will tell / What I have read in this scroll of stone; / I will spell out this writing on hill and meadow. . . . All pangs of death, all cries of birth, / Are in the mute, moss-covered stones; / They are eloquent to my hands. / O beautiful, blind stones, inarticulate and dumb! . . . Rude and unresponsive are the stones; / Yet in them divine things lie concealed; / I hear their imprisoned chant. . . .” (*Song*, 3; 8; 9). Helen Keller, *The Song of the Stone Wall* (New York: The Century Co., 1910).
– and does – here “utter / The thoughts that arise in me” – and so becomes a living demonstration of the poem’s meaning.

The simulacrum of reading that Keller produces here suggests the revelation of hidden orders of meaning. If this mute object, in her hands, takes on a speaking presence, might not such a presence suffuse all manner of other objects? If only we could perform the task of translation, we might discover alternate registers of meaning latent in the world around us – a song in a stone, an alphabet in a wallpaper pattern, a poem on a beach. Though these meanings may ordinarily remain in the “background” of our experience, Keller nevertheless reminds us that she is not a privileged seer; rather, we, like her, already have the tools for their perception: We are already acquainted with them in the “mystery” that is reading itself.

This, perhaps, is why Holmes cries. James ends his Talks to Teachers (1892) with a lecture “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” – “the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.”12 As James reminds us, we are “certain” to be blind to the reality of others – but we can, at times, come to “sight.” James describes the experience of this conversion: “This higher vision of an inner significance in what, until then, we had realized only in the dead external way, often comes over a person suddenly; and, when it does so, it makes an epoch in his history.”13 In this scene it is not Keller who is figured as blind, but Holmes. The statue, the stone (the woman, the book) are “suddenly” shown to have an “inner significance”; in the moment of revelation, Holmes too is converted: from stone, to water. He now can “see.”


13 Ibid., 848.
Writing to Keller in 1908, James commended her work in *The World I Live In*. “I won’t praise your power over language, or your clearness of discrimination or your genius for psychological insight, for I don’t want to add to the spoiling process to which you have been subjected so long!!!” he wrote. “The sum of it is that you’re a blessing, & I’ll kill any one who says you’re not!”

When Keller replied, he repeated the observation: “…in general I am quite disconcerted, professionally speaking, by your account of yourself before your ‘consciousness’ was awakened by instruction,” he confessed. “But whatever you were or are, you’re a blessing!”

Keller was, in a sense, condemned to be a “blessing” – to perform the “miracle” of her own making again and again. Years later, in need of money, she and Sullivan went on the lecture circuit. As one writer observed in 1930, “the two women have demonstrated the process of instruction hundreds of times. Always the climax, when Helen repeats in her queer, laboring voice, ‘Ah-eee ammm nnnot ha-dummmm nnnowoo!’ is infinitely moving.” Again and again, she brought her audience to marvel at the “trick” of her own language, the same “trick” that governs our own. As the writer’s tone suggests, however, a “trick” may soon grow tiresome.

Over the course of these chapters, I have argued that these texts in some way become engines of experience. But machines are, at times, too reliable. In *Principles*, and throughout his

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16 Ibid.

writing, James relied upon what he took to be the involuntary and inflexible responses of the brain. Watching reading happen can perhaps happen anywhere; but if the effect can be repeated, it is also at times repetitive. Indeed, one need only recall the experience of reading “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story that, in fewer than ten pages, seems to run over and over the same ground, writer and reader seemingly “stuck” in the same disordered “loop” as the fevered narrator. Once one has perceived the change in a hollow box, one might shuttle between its aspects at will, but one quickly tires of the exercise: one only needs to do it once.

But the limits of this technique were also its virtue: one need only effect the transformation once. In Joseph Jastrow’s chapter on “The Mind’s Eye,” he included a note to the reader, and an encouragement: “In order to obtain the effects described in the various illustrations it is necessary in several cases to regard the figures for a considerable time and with close attention. The reader is requested not to give up in case the first attempt to secure the effect is not successful, but to continue the effort for a reasonable period.” 18 Gilman, Twain, James and Keller likewise insist that we do repeat ourselves, run over the same ground; if, in the “first attempt” we do not come to direct, first-hand “acquaintance” – we will “continue the effort for a reasonable period.” All one needs is a single touch, after all. Once one had felt the “germ” of experience – cut triangles from a star, perceived the woman in the wallpaper, rendered a “white” woman “black,” noted a “cold sun” – one could watch for, listen for, feel for this experience well past the moment of reading.

The experience was built to travel. William James, Richard Poirier observes, seemed to suggest that “work with language can somehow occur anywhere at all and can therefore have

18 Jastrow, Fact and Fable, 278.
measurable effects outside poetry, upon the economic, social, or historical order of things.”

Though Poirier offers this as a critique, James did in fact make good on this promise. The “work with language” that James invokes in Principles can, in fact, “occur anywhere at all” – in any book, in any paper, in “any word on this page.” More important perhaps, the “work” could occur in any reader – the “poor visualizer” as well as the “good,” the tactile as well as the audile.

For her part, Keller made much of the single statement she was enjoyed to repeat. In Art as Experience (1934), John Dewey describes “the abiding struggle of art” as the struggle to “convert materials that are stammering or dumb in ordinary experience into eloquent media.”

Keller makes this conversion manifest for her reader, as she did for Oliver Wendell Holmes. If, as Dewey argues, this is the measure of the aesthetic, then we may call Keller’s Story a work of art in the most profound sense of the term; and Keller herself an artist of experience – an honor we might surely extend to Gilman, Twain and James as well.

But as I hope has become clear by now, such an assessment is largely irrelevant to their work. Writing in 1934, Dewey felt the urgent importance of re-acquainting his readers with a lost feeling for the aesthetic. The experience of art was neither privileged, nor foreign, he urged. Rather, there was a clear “continuity” between “the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” and “the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art.”

He advised his audience to approach an artwork as simply as they would approach a friend:

The problem in question is not unlike that we daily undergo in the effort to understand another person with whom we habitually associate. All friendship is a solution to the

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21 Ibid., 2.
problem. Friendship and intimate affection are not the result of information \textit{about} another person even though knowledge may further their formation. But it does so only as it becomes an integral part of sympathy through the imagination. It is when the desires and aims, in the interests and modes of response of another become an expansion of our own being that we understand him. We learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their results give true instruction, for they are built into our own structure.\footnote{Ibid., 350.}

As Dewey pointed out, aesthetic experience was \textit{already} familiar to his readers – in the ordinary bonds of friendship, in the conversion that occurs between a distant knowledge \textit{“about another person”} and the fully realized ties of \textit{“intimate affection.”} Thus, if his readers were perhaps intimidated or confused when approaching a \textit{“strange”} art object, they need not be so: they were \textit{already equipped} with the tools for its perception; they were \textit{already acquainted with}, had \textit{already felt}, the meaning of a true \textit{“sympathy through the imagination”} in the ordinary and everyday experience of \textit{“all friendship.”} Nothing more was required.

Keller, Twain, Gilman and James, instruct us in the converse truth. If we find it difficult to approach \textit{“strange”} people, we need not look far in order to find a model for apprehending others. In fact, \textit{we are already acquainted with} it, \textit{have already felt} it, in the germ of aesthetic experience that comes with the conversion of shapes to signs – in the experience, that is, of reading. Across the dividing lines of disability, race, gender, illness – across the dividing line presented by the simple otherness of other bodies – we make a leap, a leap no different than the one required to interpret a page of writing. The distance travelled cannot be taken as a credit to ourselves – indeed, as I have argued, we have been repeatedly coerced into traversing it. But if these writers have at times duped us, conned us, \textit{made us look}, it is in the service of Dewey’s \textit{“true instruction”} – a factual \textit{“expansion of our own being.”}

As Dewey points out, the art object is not altered by our perception of it – after all, \textit{it} does
not care whether we have come to know it. Rather, it is we who are changed by aesthetic experience: the “enduring effect upon those who perceive and enjoy,” Dewey writes, “will be an expansion of their sympathies, imagination, and sense.” And when we do “perceive and enjoy,” we too join in the artistic project: “To some degree we become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and by bringing it to pass, our own experience is reoriented.” As I hope has become clear by now, these texts do not ask us to assess whether they are works of art; rather, the question is whether we, their readers, have sufficiently become artists.

23 Ibid., 347–8.
24 Ibid., 348.
INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER I. READING “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”


CHAPTER II. READING PUDD’NHEAD WILSON

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CHAPTER III. READING PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY


CHAPTER IV. READING THE STORY OF MY LIFE


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