Modernist Angels of History: 
Reading the Politics of the Historical Self in Walter 
Benjamin, Katherine Mansfield, Gertrude Stein, 
and Laura (Riding) Jackson 

by 
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Abstract

This dissertation reads the self-representations of four modernists—Walter Benjamin, Katherine Mansfield, Gertrude Stein, and Laura (Riding) Jackson—as exemplars of the complexity of modernity and as productive subject matter for a dialectical criticism. Benjamin’s writing of the 1930s, both his autobiographies and his critical writing on historiography, provides a foundation for the “oscillatory” method pursued: seeking after contradictions—of self/history and of subject/object, especially—not to resolve them but to examine their movement in language. Each chapter examines a particular modernist in depth, working to arrive at a model or strategy for close reading his or her texts and to discover a politics of form. What comes together in these readings is the unerring complexity of self-representation in the context of modernity, so that these particular writers become variations on Benjamin’s famous Angel of History—staring melancholically at the “catastrophe” of received history, forced to “see” and to represent the horrors of the past. The question for each of Benjamin, Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson becomes: how does one encapsulate the complex experience of the present, powerfully coloured by the past and indeed the future? In reading these translations from perception to text dialectically, recognizing that they are never fixed or closed, we can begin to identify a politics of critique and of revolution.

Keywords: Modernism; Walter Benjamin; Angel of History; self-representation; dialectic; politics of form
For my Mom, a past ever present to me.
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His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past.

-Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” 392
Introduction:

Modernist Angels of History

The historical materialist can take only a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished. This inventory is called culture. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which the historical materialist cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not also a document of barbarism. The historical materialist keeps his distance from all of this. He has to brush history against the grain—even if he needs a barge pole to do it.

-Walter Benjamin, Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History” 406-7

Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
—Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!

You know him, reader, this fastidious monster,
—Hypocritical reader,—my fellow,—my brother!

-Charles Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur” 7

“Always Historicize!” and/as “Make it new!”

Turning on an unresolved contradiction fundamental to literary criticism—that between the subject and the object—this project offers Walter Benjamin as both a theoretical frame and a signal example for the ways this tension plays out in literary texts, and for the implications this incommensurability has for the study of modernism. As a way to begin mapping this project, I will examine two oft-cited and ostensibly opposed injunctions, one for Marxist criticism (“Always historicize!”) and the other for artistic
practice (“Make it new!”). I juxtapose them not to reinforce their difference, that sense that history and the past must either be determinate or jettisoned; rather, I see these dictates as oscillating polarities, as a dialectical opposition not to be resolved in a synthesis: instead, following Benjamin’s own example, I seek to “blast” them out of their received narratives to isolate the political tensions they reveal.¹ For the purposes of this project, Benjamin’s historiographic method—as articulated in both his critical and autobiographical texts—can be productively reframed as a model for reading the multivalent politics of modernist self-representation, as exemplified by the writers under examination in this dissertation: Walter Benjamin, Katherine Mansfield, Gertrude Stein, and Laura (Riding) Jackson.

In the “Preface” to The Political Unconscious, when Fredric Jameson declares that “Always historicize!” is the “transhistorical imperative” of all dialectical thought and the “slogan” that will “turn out to be the moral” of his text (9), he offers it as a critical vantage point that he sees as a balm to the “formal dilemma” facing all cultural critics (13); we can observe, Jameson suggests,

an uneasy struggle for priority between models and history, between theoretical speculation and textual analysis, in which the former seeks to transform the latter into so many mere examples, adduced to support its abstract propositions, while the latter continues insistently to imply that the theory itself was only so much methodological scaffolding, which can readily be dismantled once the serious business of practical criticism is under way. (13-14)

¹ As I do throughout this project, I am borrowing here from Benjamin’s rich storehouse of allegorical imagery, particularly from his theses “On the Concept of History,” where—among other fraught and complex images—Benjamin presents the historical materialist “brush[ing] history against the grain” (392) and “blast[ing] open the continuum of history” (396); the hunchback who is “a master at chess” (389); the angel of history (392); the “tiger’s leap into the past” (395); the modern subject’s “weak messianic power” (390); and the concept of “homogenous, empty time,” contrasted with “now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time” (395; 397). Each of these images will figure prominently in the explorations that follow below.
Neither of these options is particularly palatable for Jameson because he sees them instead as interdependent, particularly under the auspices of a Marxist critical practice. For Jameson, “Always historicize!” functions as both theory and practice, as both methodology and application. His “slogan” is a dialectic that mediates or oscillates between these extreme formulations—theory vs. close reading, which traditionally have been conceived, he says, as “rigorously incompatible” (14)—simultaneously preserving and cancelling the tension between them with an injunction, a call to action informed by a foundational theoretical ideal. By always historicizing, Jameson suggests, the Marxist critic can move between articulating the “abstract proposition” of historical materialism and demonstrating its salience “on the ground” of a particular cultural-historical moment or text. By the turn of the century, with the advent of the theory wars and the rise of new historicism, identity politics and cultural studies, Jameson’s injunction had become something of a truism for cultural criticism—to the point that in 1996 Michael P. Steinberg can claim that a new, tongue-in-cheek slogan is in order: “Who doesn’t historicize?” (2). This common sense reaction speaks to both the versatility and the obviousness of Jameson’s dictum, making it an important, oft-cited, and occasionally misapplied methodological foundation for thinking through and with literary texts.

Ezra Pound’s famous dictum is similarly doubled—both theory and practice, both influential and pat. Further, “make it new” has itself been ‘made new’ again and again—as a rebus for modernist artistic practice, a key ironically applied post facto. Indeed, as Jed Rasula points out in a recent piece in Modernism/Modernity,

...considering the ubiquity of references to this famous phrase, it’s surprising to realize that Make It New was not published until 1934, when Pound was immersed in politics and economics. In Canto LIII, he commemorated the Chinese emperor Tching Tang [Ch’êng T’ang],

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2 I will have more to say about oscillation—as projected in the work of Peter Hitchcock, in particular—and about its relationship to mediation below, and in Chapter 1 when I explore Benjamin’s “dialectical image.”
founder of the Shang Dynasty in the eighteenth century, who in Pound’s account “wrote MAKE IT NEW / on his bath tub / Day by day make it new.” In this context, the it in question concerns statecraft. Pound’s—or Tching Tang’s—adage has populated countless accounts of modernism, and it may be the most frequently repeated quip of the early twentieth century. It’s succinct, memorable, and relevant. But it’s also slightly anachronistic, for the steady drumbeat of The New preceded Make It New by several decades—during which Pound himself contributed to the polyrhythm of its allure. With the migratory tenacity of a virus, this adjective fertilized the avant-garde wherever it landed. (713-14)

Rasula historicizes “The New” here—in the context of Pound’s oeuvre, and also of his milieu—pointing up in particular its anachronism. This is not to suggest that it need be discarded; in fact, Rasula proceeds to catalogue imaginings of “the new” in the European avant-garde, concluding that “Pound’s slogan has had such preponderant influence—his imperative is hard to resist, after all—that it can hardly be consigned to the historical past. Its insistence presses forward, inexorably” (729). I want to dwell for a moment on the forward movement of Rasula’s assessment of the “new” in modernism, the sense that it points towards the future and rejects the past, except as a marker of causality and “influence.” This perspective, and indeed the criteria of Rasula’s catalogue more generally, jives with Michael Levenson’s recent study, Modernism, where the author recalls that “[t]he agon of modernism was not a collision between novelty and tradition but a contest of novelties, a struggle to define the trajectory of the new” (5).

In no way do I reject the presence of this “contest” in the annals of modernist aesthetic practice—starting perhaps with Virginia Woolf’s declaration that Western culture changed “on or about December 1910” (Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown 4)—but I would suggest, after Susan Friedman, Kurt Heinzelman, and many others, that the historical cannot be extricated or repressed (by critics or artists alike) without

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3 Michael North’s “The Making of ‘Make It New’” in Guernica magazine provides a recent example of this contradiction of the historical built into Pound’s slogan—what he calls “a dense palimpsest of historical ideas about the new” (para. 10).
consequences. Heinzelman points out that originality has its etymological roots in origins, in “the auctoritee of the past, and [that] this authority was accessed by the ‘new’ writer primarily through the device of allusion”—in other words, through a shared experience and within the “same cultural milieu” (131). Its modernist obverse, the ostensible rejection of the past in favour of the wholly new and original, is equally tied to context and to the past, as Friedman points out:

[T]he relational consciousness of modernity is based in historical illusionism—an insistence on "making it new" as a manifesto that refuses to acknowledge the presence of the past in the present and future. The more modernity protests its absolute newness, the more it suppresses its rootedness in history. And the more that history is repressed, the more it returns in symbolic forms to haunt and disrupt the illusionary and ideological mythology of the new. (503)

This disruption does not lead into a nostalgic celebration of the past, however: acknowledging the past’s inevitable ‘return’ is a critical perspective poised on the threshold between the past and the future, with the present (in the form of text, those “symbolic forms”) as its vanishing point. This is a “making new” of old material—that elusive “it” in Pound’s exhortation—a honing in on the practice of reading the past as a way to grasp the possibilities for the future. In the same way, Benjamin’s Arcades Project imagined and constructed Paris as a “dialectical fairyland” that served up wish images of its future, registering the ways the past utopically prefigured Benjamin’s present (Eiland and McLaughlin ix). In this productive but counterintuitive way, the modernist writer can “make it new” by exposing how past texts are “haunt[ed]” by their future uses, and their future silences. It is an imagining of the future by dwelling on the past. This possibility points to the interdependence of these two influential slogans: making it new as a form of historicization, and historicization as a “making new.”

Historicizing the question of the “new” refocuses our attention simultaneously on the critic (the one who historicizes) and on the artist (the one who “makes it new”)—and I will work to demonstrate that this examination boils down to a question of self-
representation. Put another way, this project is positioned between its subjects (four modernist writers) and its objects (their self-representations), as a way to “brush history against the grain” and see what is “made new.” Again and again, this interstitial critical space points us toward the proposition that “new” forms of modernist self-representation—in poetics statements, in criticism, in fiction and poetry—are at once intensely individual and broadly structural, insistently “in the now” and unredeemingly stuck in the past. Benjamin’s Angel of History, which provides a suggestive allegory for (and indeed the title of) this project, figures this tension precisely: the angel’s melancholy and expressive power comes both from its movement forward—driven by the inexorable winds of progress—and from its orientation backwards, its horror-stricken eyes turned towards the catastrophes of the past. These contradictions are never resolved but are housed—uncomfortably, ambiguously, confusingly, dialectically—in a textual subjectivity that plays out in the writing of these four modernists. Drawing from Benjamin’s writing as a source of both method and example, then, I am pursuing a reframing of modernist critical and artistic practice as obsessively subjective. This approach is not strictly “new,” though the dialectic I am exploring works to reframe a number of the truisms of high modernism—the centrality of the epiphany and of innovation, the refiguring of time, the pursuit of objectivity and impersonality, the desire for an outside or a “third way”—placing them in a constellation that gestures towards an apposite reading that explores their underbellies and offers provisional alternative readings: that innovation and the new are fundamentally reactionary and/or a species of “return”; that assertive self-representations (even ones that assume or pursue a form of “impersonality”) cover over of the paucity of the liberal subject; that idealisms point up their own reliance on the materialisms of class structure; and that the constructed past in fact says more about the present and about an imagined future than about some contained and objectified history. Following after Benjamin’s example—to

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4 I will explore the nuances of Benjamin’s Angel—and its ambivalent status as a kind of self-representation—in Chapter 1.
which I will turn in detail in the first chapter—this project pursues a criticism of both arrest and movement, an oscillation between argument and deferral that explores unresolved contradictions. What is “new” about all this is the montage of these oscillations, creating a series of dialectical images that reveal and contest the political and aesthetic structures within which and against which these writers worked—demonstrating the complexity and difficulty of representing the self in modernity. By constructing representations of past selves—by finding “new” ways to make their own past an object of scrutiny—Benjamin, Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson traversed and textualized the complexity of experience in a forward-looking and progress-oriented modernity. Indeed, my reframings serve not as a rejection of those shopworn modernist tropes—the mask, temporal expansion, aesthetic difficulty, the epiphany, and so on—but as an acknowledgment of the depth and versatility of these texts and strategies as historical documents and as theoretical interventions. They are a textual well to which this dissertation will return again and again.

**Modernist Politics: Innovation, Impersonality, Apocalypse**

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of work on modernism that has altered the field in substantial ways. As Michael Levenson claims, “Modernist studies have at once widened and deepened. An actively engaged community of scholars has produced more ambitious acts of contextualization, more inclusive histories, and more precise readings of formidable works” (”Introduction” 1). In its rereading and complicating of received modernist tropes (especially impersonality, the epiphany, aesthetic innovation)—in its yoking of political and aesthetic contradictions to the modernist project of self-representation—this project participates in one facet of that expansion. In *Modernism at the Barricades*, Stephen Eric Bronner succinctly lays out in political terms the uneven and contradictory ground upon which this project stakes its arguments:
Modernists believed that they were contesting tradition in the name of the new and the constraints of everyday life in the name of multiplied experience and individual freedom [....] They opposed the “system” without understanding how it worked or what radical political transformation required and implied. Oddly, they never understood how deeply they were enmeshed in what they opposed. Modernists envisioned an apocalypse that had no place for institutions or agents generated within modernity. theirs was less a concern with class consciousness than an opposition to the alienating and reifying constraints of modernity. Unfettered freedom of expression and a transformation in the experience of everyday life were the modernists’ goals [....] [T]heir utopian inclinations were transparent from the beginning. Modernists believed that the new would not come from within modernity, but appear as an external event of force for which, culturally, the vanguard would act as catalyst. (3)

Bronner identifies a fundamental but undefined revolutionary impulse in the pursuit of the “new,” so that Pound’s injunction—as Rasula suggests when he points out that the “it” on Tching Tang’s bathtub refers to “statecraft”—seemingly can function as an artistic credo while ignoring its own political foundations. In Bronner’s formulation, the modernists’ opposition proceeds as a sort of apolitical politics, “without [an] understanding” of the praxis required to enact its ideals in the socio-political world. He sees in the modernists a desire for and a pursuit of an outside—a utopia unconstrained by the compromises and immoralities of the modern world and inaugurated by some undefined “external event” catalyzed by the artist. What Bronner describes is a post facto revolutionary politics—a world imagined first, materialized second—and offers the Romantic model of artists as “catalysts,” of writers who are, as in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s

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As I will suggest in chapter 3 on Stein’s poetics and in chapter 4 on (Riding) Jackson’s utopian linguistics, this modernist impulse mirrors what Benjamin calls in his theses on history a “weak messianic power” (390)—an awareness of and a faith in the at once redemptive and apocalyptic potential of the act of uncovering buried histories. Tracing that which is subsumed in the “catastrophe” of the past is Benjamin’s route to that “outside”—and Stein and (Riding) Jackson articulated the obverse (an expanded present and a futurity, respectively). Indeed, as I will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters, the “power” in these acts derives not from the source but from their movement towards and away from that impossible-to-achieve utopia.
famous formulation, “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (46). Indeed, there is an unavoidable politics inherent to the abstracted pursuit of the aesthetically new, and it skews to conservatism as readily as it does to radicalism, to the right as easily as to the left. In “Politics and the Avant-Garde,” Raymond Williams points out, “What we can identify in [the avant-garde’s] most active and creative years, underlying many of its works, is a range of diverse and fast-moving artistic methods and practices, and at the same time a set of relatively constant positions and beliefs” (52). In Williams’ estimation, the practical and political ramifications of this contradiction between theory and practice, between art and politics, are double-edged: “[T]he politics of the avant-garde, from the beginning, could go either way. The new art could find its place either in a new social order or in a culturally transformed but otherwise persistent and recuperated old order” (62).

Both Bonner and Williams are identifying a disconnect between artistic practice and political affiliation or alignment; and both, importantly, found this description on a fundamental modernist commitment to the new, the “fast-moving,” the “[u]nfettered.” But, again, this aesthetic commitment does not have a necessary or automatic relation to a politics—it points to an outside, for Bonner, or to an unresolved ambiguity, for Williams. The tension here between theory and practice is fertile ground for all the scholarly reexaminations and complications of modernist writing taking place over the last few decades—allowing for local specificities in particular texts, for contradictions and unevenness in assessment of an oeuvre (so that, for example, Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding’s essay collection can offer Eliot simultaneously as an innovator and a
reactionary in both his early and late writing), for simultaneous reassessment and reinforcement of old truisms of canonical High Modernism. To take one useful example, recent critics have pointed up the contradictions and complexities of the modernist doctrine of impersonality—articulating its usefulness and its limits as a strategy for exploring and responding in a complex way to the political valences of their milieus. Using Wyndham Lewis’ famous invective “against personality” as an inaugural moment in modernist self-fashioning, Rochelle Rives’ *Modernist Impersonalities* reframes this call to response as a problem of tactics:

[S]ome form of self and psychology, of “personality,” is necessary for creating an interior—an affective “space” that positions subjects beside each other—such that dimension or structure exists in tandem with a flattened connection that promotes collectivity. As a means of negotiating this dynamic, the impersonal aesthetic offered modernists an attractive solution to many of the political and metaphysical problems modernity presented to them in imagining their own roles as artists and intellectuals. (Rives 18-19)

Rives is careful to avoid suggesting that the tension between interiority and exteriority—and the movement from individual to collective—can finally be “solved” by an aesthetics; indeed, her description here matches up with Bronner’s and Williams’: art is not an outside but rather an abstraction that *posits* an exterior as a way to shore up the “interior.” These tensions set up a process, an aesthetics in motion, says Jewel Spears Brooker in her examination of T.S. Eliot’s landmark essay that in many ways inaugurated the modernist cult of impersonality:

The “self-annihilation,” “self-sacrifice” and “self-surrender” mentioned in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” are not isolated events, but part of a

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6 Brett Neilson, in an essay to which I will turn in my conclusion, pitches Eliot as sympathetic to socialism, suggesting that Eliot’s “arguments [in] ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ may not be wholly irreconcilable with Benjamin’s attempt to revivify a moribund and historically ineffective Marxism” (207); Jason Harding reads in the same essay a more traditional-minded Eliot, one whose critical perspective rests upon a “framework in which we appreciate originality: no author, not even the avant-garde extremist, creates ex nihilo” (99).
dynamic and continuous dialectical process. What is annihilated is the autonomous self, the self as an all-sufficient whole. This death of the self, moreover, is not an end in itself, but a means to the greater end of realizing the self in writing. (Brooker 42-43)

In this project, I aim to bring together these two conclusions. Though they start from a position that understands and acknowledges the impossibility of capturing an “autonomous self”—that one of the “political and metaphysical problems” to which Rives refers is that the modern self never was “whole” or “all-sufficient”—writers like Benjamin, Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson nonetheless stage this pursuit in their texts. We can read these self-representations as a dialectic that oscillates between two further impossibilities: an interior (guaranteed by self-sufficient memories, and by a singular identity) and an exterior (confirmed by objective knowledge of history and of time, and by a predictable and definable audience). In this way, we can see that the act of self-representation allows a writer to explore the political and social import of “impersonality,” a line of flight that points in the end to the possibility—as after the apocalypse—of “realizing” a complex and layered subject, though always in motion, always a process and a possibility and never a final product.

Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* also plays out this contradiction in its oft-cited opening poem, “Au Lecteur” (quoted as an epigraph above)—imbricating the act of reading with the act of writing. The reader is interpolated with knowledge of the “fastidious monster,” a figure that can be identified simultaneously as the speaker, the poet, and the “hypocritical reader”—each of whom are “my brother!” The epistemological ground on which the poem transacts its meaning shifts continuously in Baudelaire’s poems, leaving the melancholic flâneur poet with a final authority even as he seems to give it up to language or to his “brothers.” The reader knows as much, or as little, as the writer. Levenson reads this tension as a dialectic that reveals impersonality to be a provisional seizing of interpretive control that nonetheless offers no guarantee of a final and identifiable “I”:

11
[E]ven as subjectivity [in Les Fleurs du mal] abandons itself to others (to their accidents, intrigues, desires), it retains the claim of verse. The speaker suddenly rouses himself and puts a frame around the world that has framed him. The effect, distinctive and influential, is that the lyrics hover between sensation and object. The lyrics project themselves outward, toward a world that remains at a distance, spectacular and seductive but always on the point of dissolving into the sensations of the depthless “I,” which reserves the final privilege of bestowing aesthetic form. (Modernism 114)

The writer is no less a hypocrite than is the reader, in Baudelaire’s formulation. Within the text—in the act of self-representation—we are all complicit as “brothers,” all part of the collective, “fastidious” pursuit of that impossible wholeness which cannot but be monstrous. At the same time, though, we cannot ignore Baudelaire’s status as creator, as what Levenson calls here the “bestow[er]” of “aesthetic form.” It is within the text, then, that the modernist can assert some measure of control—and where this project works to identify or register a writer’s conscious and unconscious politics of literary form, a relation or reaction to modernity.

This sort of registration of politics picks up one strand of Marxist scholarship—Peter Hitchcock’s and Fredric Jameson’s work on the dialectic—and reframes their work with the suggestion that social and political tensions are most starkly revealed in that most personal of spaces: in the textualization of the self. Again, I am aiming not to jettison nor to metastasize this representation as a capturing of some “whole” subject but to examine writers’ process of attempting to capture that wholeness. In Archaeologies of the Future, Jameson draws our attention to what can be identified, even in the most de-subjectified work:

Even the driest artistic production—a collage of sounds by Cage, for example, or the dissonance of various geometric shapes in Malevich—retains an echo of expressiveness, or better still, necessarily requires one, for those human viewers or listeners we still are; while the most minimal expressionist shriek is still necessarily a construction. What does happen is that the avant-garde aestheticians themselves emphasize one of these features over another in their programs and manifestos. (43)
In other words, the impersonal work directs our gaze elsewhere, to a space beyond where the creator sets the parameters of understanding and lays out the terms of expression. For Jameson, however, this elsewhere is actually contained within the work itself, in its “necessary” gesture towards an audience, those “hypocritical reader[s]” whose presence is also the fundamental condition for art to enact social meaning. This is another way of saying that the oscillation between the interior and the exterior—contained and identifiable in the unresolved tensions in the work of art—is a fundamental part of a dialectical, Marxist criticism that seeks to examine this movement without landing on a finalized interpretation. Indeed, on this view the movement of history is founded upon irresolvable social contradictions, so that if there is interpretation, it is of the social and political context that conditions the work, rather than of the work of art itself.

On the same principle, I contend, Benjamin’s writing seems intent on avoiding a fully-furnished political program. In Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, Terry Eagleton observes that Benjamin’s theses on history “are a superb revolutionary document; but they consistently evoke class struggle in terms of consciousness, image, memory, and experience, and are almost wholly silent on the question of its political forms. Between ‘base’ and ‘experience,’ the political instance is mutely elided” (176). Eagleton claims that this elision “has its roots in the very political character of Benjamin’s epoch. Stranded between social democracy and Stalinism, his political options were narrow indeed” (177). We can read this gap in Benjamin’s work—and in the work of Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson, as I will explore below—in two ways: 1) materially, as an indication of the limits of direct and politicized artistic outcry in a time of rising fascism and widening bureaucratization; or 2) formally, as a return to language and poetic innovation as the ideational site of revolution and social reimagining. This is not to suggest that Benjamin’s are a politics of erasure, blankness, aporia; these formal ambiguities and ambivalences are rather a direct engagement with
a politics of representation and of ideology critique. And it is in the examination, identification, and exploration of linguistic form that this project works to map a dialectical politics onto these modernist self-representations. As Hitchcock suggests, “One of the major achievements of cultural studies in its short history is not that it has masked culture as a preeminent form of politics but that it has significantly broadened the available knowledge about how culture is a ground of the political, and not just its passive effect” (13).

Hitchcock’s work on Marxist materialism provides a critical trajectory for examining this problematic at work in texts, particularly his 1999 reframing of the dialectic as oscillation in Oscillate Wildly. The text proffers an “oscillatory paradigm” for materialist theory (1)—presenting it as a “heuristic device about the way the world of theory and the theory of the world works at this time” (19). In Hitchcock’s critical approach, we can see the movement of ideas as constitutive of the words we use to “fix” them. Oscillation, “a keyword in the materialism of the present” (17-18), draws our attention to the ways theory must rely on materiality, as process, as contradiction, as movement—and his approach gives us another way to read the dearth of directly politicized material in Benjamin’s work (and indeed, a way to read the politics of the less obviously political work of modernist innovators like Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson). For Hitchcock, oscillation is “not simply a metaphor but a concept” (6), one that has “explanatory...power” (7). Hitchcock admits that pursuing an approach that offers no final judgement carries with it an “attendant danger for materialist politics: that is, oscillation is simultaneously vacillation—a moment of doubt, of hesitation, of wavering” (3). And though we might acknowledge that his esoteric approach may well provide only a “limited political constituency” (Hitchcock 19), I suggest that the power of reading oscillation resides in the ways such an approach helps to draw out previously unseen nuances of text, the ways vacillation keeps possibilities in play. Hitchcock’s
formulation offers a way to read the material politics of ambiguity—so that indeterminacy can be tethered to a politics and freed from accusations of elitism, esoterism, irrelevancy. Beyond the theoretical exigencies, then, I see in Hitchcock’s work the possibility of a literary-critical approach, one that takes into account Jameson’s historical injunction (“Always historicize!”) and highlights the revelatory power of dialectical tension in texts: it reveals the working of ideology, the ways it works to resolve ambiguities in order to “fix” social structures. Moreover, Hitchcock’s examination of oscillation—his careful framing of its theoretical limits—highlights the productive possibilities of Benjamin’s work, a body of text that both explores and demonstrates the edges and limits of a materialist politics of form. Indeed, as I will explore below, oscillation provides a keyword for understanding Benjamin, and by extension, understanding Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson—so that this project offers an “oscillatory paradigm” of its own: a formal reading of unresolved tensions as a material politics.

Aura and the Dialectical Image: Benjaminian Readings/Reading Benjamin

Walter Benjamin’s late critical work helps to reveal that it is this irresolvable modernist contradiction—the simultaneous giving up and seizing of control in the representation of the self—that leaps forth from modernist texts when we “brush them

7 I note that I am using ambiguity “against the grain” of the main trajectory of modernist scholarship—preferring to keep the multiplicity of meaning in motion, rather than to land on one side or the other of the divide. Though beyond the scope of the present study, William Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity, an inaugurating text for New Criticism, leaves this possibility available—and indeed invokes the context—when he suggests that “an ambiguity, then, is not satisfying in itself, nor is it, considered as a device on its own, a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation” (235). This context—those “peculiar requirements”—alters the resolution we might achieve in our reading of ambiguity, so that every “satisf[ied]” ambiguity is open to (and can be set back in motion by) a new contextualization, a new interpretation, a new readerly situation.
against the grain.” In reading Benjamin’s late critical writing alongside his autobiographical constructions, this project articulates the ways that a Benjaminian registering of unresolved tensions and ambiguities “boils down” to an oscillation between self and history (and more broadly, between subject and object)—the notion that the subject in modernity is “out of time,” disconnected, lost, and that this necessary failure leads to both a revolutionary (“messianic”) possibility and a more conservative reterritorialization of power. Benjamin’s oeuvre (from roughly 1920 to 1940) is generally split in two—an early idealist phase (characterized by essays on language and translation) and a later Marxist phase (characterized by essays on technology and art and on revolutionary theatre). Other readers of Benjamin’s work have disputed this split—and I am following after such critics as Gerhard Richter, Rolf Tiedemann, and Susan Buck-Morss in suggesting that Benjamin’s later work incorporates much of his earlier, less-obviously-politicized writing.

The disparate strands of Benjamin’s thinking weave most subtly, I suggest, in his critique of subjectivity—more specifically for this project, in his insistence on the ambiguous textualization of the subjective. In his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin tells us that

Language is primary. Not only to meaning. Also to one’s self. In the world’s structure, the dream loosens individuality like a hollow tooth. This loosening of self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication. (179)

Benjamin pushes for an analysis of rhetorical structures as a way to articulate the “fruitful, living experience” embodied in surrealist art. But his larger point is that language is primary to subjective experience, that it can be an objective, “outside” force that mobilizes revolutionary thought and action by “loosen[ing] individuality” and its ideological construction. Artistic engagement for Benjamin seems to require this

8 See Tiedemann, “Dialectics at a Standstill” 932-5; Buck-Morss The Dialectics of Seeing 11-17; Richter, Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography 30-1 and 54-9.
paradox of language—that one is both defined by the “intoxication” of dreams (to a originary and objective state of non-ideological language) and can “step outside” of its “domain” (asserting agency over one’s self-expression). The oscillation between these possibilities becomes identifiable for Benjamin in the aesthetic practice of the surrealists, who “loosen[ed] individuality” without jettisoning it altogether, but the larger point is the way he constructs language as a “primary” consideration.

Benjamin’s clearest articulation of his methodology for the *Arcades Project* transfers this argument into a rhetorical strategy. In a note-form injunction, Benjamin describes the

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (460)

Benjamin’s method seeks to place marginalized texts in a visual register, avoiding editorialization (“no ingenious formulations”), and “allowing” the dialectical tension of the image itself to invest politically. We can identify here an elision, a lack of explanation: exactly what “use” can be made of the “rags” and “refuse” of history in this configuration? There seems to be a divestment of control over the material, a belief in the truth-value of objectivity and a sort of critical “impersonality.” However, like Baudelaire’s “hypocritical” speaker, Benjamin withholds the power of arrangement, of “montage”—so that the material in part dictates the form, but not wholly. This is what Benjamin means by “making use” of historical documents. Thus Benjamin’s concept of history invokes simultaneously the subjective and the objective—and by extension, the present and the past, the metaphysical and the material; or, more properly, Benjamin seeks a dialectic—not in the form of a synthesis but an intensification of the tension between opposites.
And it is in Benjamin’s subtle poetic expression that these irresolvable contradictions bear the most fruit—and where Benjamin’s methodology offers a critical model for this project. Take Benjamin’s characterization of aura in his widely-anthologized essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” for example:

[Aura is a] strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with your eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (104-5)

Benjamin’s natural image of the distancing effect of landscapes—one that invokes the focus of a wide-angle camera lens, of the blurring together of objects near and far—is an explanatory move that does not conclusively explain things. We can read this analogy as a description of the flattening effect of auratic art, so that the mountain and the branch are accorded equal value in spite of any natural or spatial distinctions that objectively may be in place. This metaphor can be seen as a political move on Benjamin’s part: his focus in this essay is on the status of the aura in technologized art (film, photography, lithography, and so on), on the relative authenticity and ritual power that art objects exert over the viewing subject. The “artwork” essay is a declaration of the aura’s “wither[ing]” in the face of reproducibility, of the space that is opened up in the process of technologization (“Reproducibility” 224). It is not a coincidence that the aura one experiences “of that branch” invests “while [the viewer is] resting on a summer afternoon”: it is the bourgeoisie that experiences such things, because they are afforded

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9 Unless otherwise signalled, this project will use the more recent translations of Benjamin’s writing to be found in Belknap’s 5-Volume Selected Writings, published between 1996 and 2003. This is especially relevant when considering the seminal essays that inform the theoretical model I am pursuing: Benjamin’s “work of art” essay (“The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”) and his theses on history (“On the Concept of History”), both of which were first translated in 1968 in Illuminations, edited by Hannah Arendt, in less authoritative versions that still predominate among English-speaking readers of Benjamin’s work.
the leisure time with which to contemplate. And the “withering” of the bourgeoisie’s access to the naturalized power of the aura is for a Benjamin a call to judgment. This opening up of aesthetic effect, which saps middle class control over ideology, leaves a power vacuum, and this is why Benjamin concludes his “artwork” essay with a distinction between the “aestheticization of political life” and what he sees as a more palatable filling up of the space left by this withering: “politicizing art” ("Reproducibility" 121); it is a distinction that amounts to a contest between fascist propaganda on the one hand, and Marxist activism on the other. As with many of Benjamin’s most ambiguous yet productive concepts, aura is presented as an objective category of critical analysis, but it can also be taken as an articulation of a personal politics. The ambiguity of Benjamin’s form causes meaning to oscillate between these poles, to sit—perhaps uncomfortably—in both camps simultaneously as it reframes (in this case) the history of technology. For the purposes of this project, moreover, this oscillating “apparition” focuses our attention on the complex transactions between subject and object, on the way engaged criticism that attends to these complexities can politicize (and historicize) even while it avoids overexplanation.

The emancipatory power Benjamin ascribes to technologized art—especially film—to “wither” that which is purportedly “natural” and “authentic,” those aspects of experience which are naturalized and common-sensical, can be extended to a broader critical concept central to this project’s examination of modernist self-representations: the “dialectical image.” Many critics over the years have identified this concept as central to Benjamin’s late criticism, to the historiographic method behind The Arcades Project, his attempt to write what he calls a “primal history” of capitalism ("Paris" 4). Indeed, at its most lucid points, The Arcades Project functions as a series of dialectical

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10 As I will explore below, each of these terms or phrases demonstrate the oscillating movement—across a number of contentious and overdetermined oppositions—that characterizes Benjamin’s reading of subjectivity in modernity.
images, juxtaposing quotations from police manuals, architectural tracts on department stores, his own philosophical reveries on time and messianism, and so on—in a complex admixture of the high and the low, the meditative and the reactionary. Again in a species of modernist impersonality, his juxtaposition of historical/textual material creates something more than the constituent parts: a flash of meaning can often be recognized, even though Benjamin withholds his own interpretation of the individual texts and of the meaning of the juxtapositions. The closest Benjamin comes to an explanation is “Konvolut N,” a “sheaf” subtitled “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” which offers a series of aphoristic meditations on history and epistemology. Invoking the concept in a variety of guises throughout the chapter, Benjamin presents the “dialectical image” as a way to reframe “thinking,” as an operation founded on the contradiction of movement and stasis:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process. (475)

What Benjamin calls the “materialist presentation of history” is the closest analogue to literary criticism in the configuration I am pursuing in this project—where the “object constructed” places the critic in tension with his or her material, where meaning is produced both through the “natural” meaning of the text and through the critic’s careful construction of a “dialectical image.” The “materialist” critic seeks out the textual moments “where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest,” again not to resolve the tension but to examine the movement (and the "caesura") of the dialectic. The “arrest of thoughts” is caused by the construction of a “constellation,” an array of information, facts, events, subjects. In this method, no claim is made for a permanent
halt, a final truth; instead, the critic focuses on the “caesura” that is readable only as one frame on an ever-moving cinematic reel (to use one of Benjamin’s favourite metaphors). The most prominent opposition in this operation is that between the self and history, between the critic and his or her “subject matter.” In a productive tension, there is a slip between object and subject, as it is the critic who constructs the image that ostensibly reveals an objective “truth” about an historical moment. Indeed, Benjamin’s “materialist” critic is not positioned as the agent, but is instead the catalyst for the “violent expulsion” of historical tidbits from the "continuum of historical process," from the master narrative of received history. And it is the aura of the authentic, modern subject—not least Benjamin’s own subjectivity—that is “withered” by this refigured historicization.

The most effective way to engage with this contradiction of self and history—in keeping with my provisional suggestion that the represented “self,” whether the “I” in an autobiography or the identity projected in critical prose, can function as a textual node which contradictorily “contains” various other tensions—is to examine the oscillations between straight-up “literary” texts and more theoretically-minded ones (statements of intention or aesthetics or purpose or goal). Put another way, my reading after Benjamin dwells between these generic distinctions, as a way to “brush” them “against the grain”—to see these textual identifiers in each of the writers I examine as coextensive and simultaneous, rather than hierarchical and causal. This ever-moving process can help us to identify the work of ideology at particular historical moments—the way complex, contradictory texts both reinforce and undercut dominant understandings of the self, of the past, of language itself. What follows is an elaboration of these contradictory self-representations.

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11 As each chapter will show, these “caesurae” figure in the other modernists under examination in the project as well: the “glimpse” for Mansfield, the “continuous present” for Stein, and the act of “telling” for (Riding) Jackson.
The Oscillations of Modernist Self-Representation

These explorations are organized around four disparate modernist writers, each of whose self-representations illuminate a facet of the politics of modernity. Taken together in a sort of “constellation,” to use Benjamin’s image, these writers tease out the complexities of representing or repurposing the past, of using the self—and the self as writer, as critic—as a textual site for the articulation of the oscillating structures of power, politics, knowledge, and subjectivity. This project reads these modernist texts as a cross-section of their historical moments—showing their multiple political valences, their status as documents of both “culture” and “barbarism”—and as critical engagements with the historical as such. As I hope to show, it is in the oscillations between these poles, in the layers of theory and application (both these writers and my own), that history can be made “new”—if only to reveal the way innovative techniques and surprising self-representations are only ever found already in the past.

The first chapter of this project, “Objective Selves, Subjective Objects: Walter Benjamin’s Self-Representations” is bifurcated, offering a reading of Benjamin’s longest and most complex attempt at self-representation followed by an elaboration of the historiographical method articulated in his later criticism. Taken together with his other writing in the 1930s, we can begin to see Berlin Childhood Around 1900 in particular as a further critique of bourgeoisie inheritances; in this case as he constructs his embodied experiences into dialectical images, Benjamin’s own upbringing is ripped from its context for the revelations it might bring to light of “later historical experiences.” My method here is to read Benjamin’s autobiographical work as a series of dialectical images that momentarily suspend remembered experiences in order to present them as flashes of revelation; this approach offers a subjective expansion of Benjamin’s highly politicized articulation of his “procedure.” The subject’s politics cannot be attached after the fact—absent a myopia or a dose of self-deceit—but it can be glimpsed in the acute experience of the moment, if only provisionally. I suggest that this dialectical sense of
criticism (Benjaminian historiography) can be thought of as the space where the theoretical joins with the experiential—a practice that holds both in tension, that continuously oscillates between disavowal and identification, between showing and telling, between presenting and explaining. Central to this analysis is an examination of Benjamin’s famous image of the Angel of History, that melancholic figure of the historical materialist as witness to the piled-up atrocities of the past that are pushing and progressing ever forward and reinforcing oppressive, top-down regimes at the expense of precarious human body. Benjamin’s angel offers hope (in the form of a heightened awareness of the materiality of the past) and despair (in the form of an “objective” image of extant historical determinism) in equal measure—and I suggest that his affecting image functions equally as self-portraiture and theoretical model for historical materialism, as a tension-riddled dialectical image reading and constructing dialectical images. In this oscillation, Benjamin’s writing serves this project as both exemplar of modernist self-representation and methodological foundation for reading those texts.

Chapter 2, “‘A Married Man’s Story’ and ‘Je Ne Parle Pas Français’: A ‘Glimpse’ of the Dialectic in Katherine Mansfield’s Politics of Self-Representation,” reads Katherine Mansfield’s late fiction simultaneously as an exploration of the complexities of modern subjectivity in post-WWI Europe and as an innovative form of self-portraiture. By linking Mansfield’s thinking to the “dialectical image,” I will argue that we can register the ways that formal experimentation—set in dialectical tension with memory and self-representation—offer us a “glimpse” of the writer’s role in the politics of identity. I see two late Mansfield stories, “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and the fragmentary “A Married Man’s Story,” as exemplars of the complexities of self-representation in the modernist period. What Benjamin’s theoretical apparatus illuminates is the dialectical interface between memory (the singular/subjective past) and history (the collective/objective past) in Mansfield’s work—an oscillation that Mansfield presents in her fiction as a
series of what she calls “glimpses” into the past. I will argue that in both “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and in “A Married Man’s Story,” Mansfield creates “glimpses” that juxtapose the memories of its less than canny narrators—both self-deluded artists who experience ironized epiphanic moments—with an ironic critique of the blind spots in their respective senses of self, a critique revealed in the subtleties of Mansfield’s narrative style. The tenors of the texts differ: whereas “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” dwells on the challenge and reward of Raoul’s Parisian bachelor’s life, “A Married Man’s Story” unravels the comfortable narratives of domestic bliss even as it celebrates the comforts of conformism. The failure of these writers, their inability to structure the writing of their memories, presents an image of the disconnect between bourgeois ideology and a rapidly accelerating modern world. At the same time, both stories demonstrate the dangers and ambivalences attendant to the male writer’s attempt to construct a subjectivity: namely, the concomitant victimization and/or trivialization of women that must inevitably come along with that self-construction. In a dialectical shift, then, I contend that Mansfield’s aesthetic engagements, which turn on the tensions of narrating the self, likewise structure her political position. In these two texts, Mansfield presents written selves that contain both the past and the present, the material and the abstract, and she thus enacts a dialectic that begins to unravel class, gender and empire and works to represent experience in complex and innovative ways. As she cuts into her individual and collective past, Mansfield becomes a Benjaminian Angel of History—staring wide-eyed at the wreckage of the catastrophes of domesticity, masculinity, art. In doing so, she affords a “glimpse” that constructs a political critique via domestic spaces as readily as it does global spaces.

My third chapter, “Politics of Form/Form of Politics: Gertrude Stein’s Dialectical Grammar,” contends that Gertrude Stein’s History or Messages from History is emblematic of Stein’s sustained critique of progressive historicism. In its complex textual interactions and contradictions, and in its ambiguous richness, this understudied
long prose-poem succinctly encapsulates the problematized temporality and subjectivity
Stein works to articulate in her methodological “explanations” in Lectures in America. Using Benjamin’s late writing on historical materialism as a theoretical frame, I will argue that what I call dialectical grammar—the willful nonsense and ambiguity activated by repetition and what Stein dubbed “insistence”—offers an alternative to becoming “accustomed to past present future,” as she says in “Composition as Explanation.” Throughout the text, Stein trains her eye on the word “history” and its cognates, giving it myriad definitions and inflections that interrupt, contradict, problematize, refract. These competing tensions and contradictions never fully resolve or dissolve; they are never adequately mediated by a dialectical method that would seek synthesis between oppositions; they never develop towards some explicitly political end. Instead, History or Messages from History—along with Stein’s more well-known autobiographies and histories of the 1930s—builds a web of tightly-woven strands, stretched nearly to the breaking point, oscillating between a vast number of oppositions, each modulating and resonating with the others. Stein’s “insistence” builds the impression of development, the sense that the text will arrive at a definition of history, or at a “message” with which we may gain understanding, solace, truth. But that impression is undercut radically by the uneven relation between ideas and words, the way the dialectical movement of Stein’s grammar takes us both towards and away from historical understanding. In this way, Stein, in her grammatical experimentation, stands in direct opposition to dominant modes and mores of received history, not unlike Benjamin’s melancholy Angel of History. However, History or Messages from History demonstrates that, more even than Benjamin’s historical materialist, Stein’s writerly self—in the scene of writing that stages many of the contradictions of the writer’s act of representation—stands on the contradictory edges of history, and through a dialectical grammar, intensifies the experience of ambiguity in modernity as way to reveal its inner workings.
Chapter 4, “Laura (Riding) Jackson’s Forms of Telling,” argues that an examination of Laura (Riding) Jackson’s unwavering but iconoclastic pursuit of “truth” across seven decades of writing sets in motion a number of oscillating oppositions that point up the challenge of reckoning with and representing the self in modernity. At the level of strategy or technique—how one responds to political unrest and ideological fakery—(Riding) Jackson’s late work offers telling, an ambiguous concept that can be read as a textual enactment of Benjamin’s materialist historiography; put another way, (Riding) Jackson offers a philosophical discourse, a language, for Benjamin’s silenced Angel of History to speak. As a way to think through this proposition, this chapter works in reverse chronological order—to look back, as Benjamin’s Angel of History does, at the detritus of (Riding) Jackson’s long writing career. It begins with The Telling, the text most aligned with Benjamin’s orientation towards the historical and the political (framed in the language of apocalypse), as a productive elaboration of (Riding) Jackson’s sense of history—and other “wisdom professions” like poetry—and its contradictory relation to truth in language, its slavish obedience to officialized culture and cultural institutions. What we see playing out formally in The Telling is a dismissal of history as a deliverer of top-down power structures and a positing of language as an ur-history that somehow contains the originary truth of human communication. Indeed, the nature of linguistic interaction—its political valences—preoccupies (Riding) Jackson in The Telling, and this chapter examines the seeds of these complexities of identity and communication in one of (Riding) Jackson’s preferred genres, the letter: Four Unposted Letters to Catherine (1930) and the “Letter of Abdication” from Anarchism is Not Enough (1928). The ambiguity of address in a letter—its construction of an ideal reader and its rejection of ill-suited or self-centred readership, both of which seem to posit an austere and powerful letter-writing subject—serves (Riding) Jackson as a way to articulate a writerly identity without defining it, without limiting the possibilities of expression and the writer’s access to that elusive language of “truth.” Finally, by way of conclusion, this chapter examines a “fable” that enacts the problematic of self and history invoked by
(Riding) Jackson’s philosophical writing. What each and all of these linguistic experiments demonstrate is a Laura (Riding) Jackson that stands with the oscillations of language in opposition to what she called “the muddle,” in the careful yet forceful articulation of a writer opposed to the atrocities of the bourgeois social world—imprecision, complacency, ignorance—and working tirelessly and impatiently to give us a self-representation that can tell us “truth.” In this focus on the material of language, (Riding) Jackson’s work aligns with Stein’s repetitions and reversals in her 1930s histories.

**Historical/Historicizing Self-Representations**

In spite of its broad frame, and its cadre of Benjaminsian concepts, the readings this project brings together engage with a number of focused and particular fields of inquiry. By drawing together critical and imaginative work into the same image, by seeing both theoretical and “applied” texts as a form of self-representation—rather than a process, a cause and effect, a justification and a dismissal, and so on—I can align four disparate writers along the same axis: the pursuit of complex, contradictory, unresolved selves in and through (re)writing history. In this complexity, the project begins to map the politics of these self-representations—a revolutionary protest against the ways the present political moment inevitably is structured by a past which limits and controls it, and the way this triumphal procession of the “victors” precludes an emancipated, utopian future. Each chapter makes smaller interventions, too—offering Benjamin’s aphoristic portraiture as a form of modernist artistry; Mansfield’s “glimpse” as a complexly layered modernist epiphany, at least as self-reflexive and productive as its equivalents in Joyce, Woolf, Pound, and so on; Stein’s “dialectical grammar” as a robust counterpoint to patriarchal linguistic control, a strategy as productively contradictory and politically salient as her oft-quoted maxims and aphorisms; and (Riding) Jackson’s expansion of “telling” as a productively ambiguous act of both
revelation and withdrawal. This project places these smaller arguments in a contradictory yet productive array, held together by Benjamin’s career-long commitment to intensifying tensions and to maintaining distance, the keys to a criticism that resists the fixity of the ideologies and structures of capitalist modernity. In this way, and as I will demonstrate throughout, these investigations into particular texts and particularized contexts—focused throughout on the dialectical oscillations between subject and object, self and history, past and present—repeatedly point to the represented subject as a privileged site of critical engagement.
Chapter 1.

Objective Selves, Subjective Objects: Walter Benjamin’s Self-Representations

The body that Benjamin’s autobiographies present not only retreats but also signifies that it retreats, delivering a commentary on the movement of its own withdrawal.


Can the past be objectively captured, as in a photograph? Where does interpretation, intention, agency, in short the subjective, intrude? The range of possible answers to these questions points to an irresolvable contest between opposed senses of the historical—between conceiving of the past as an identifiable object that reveals the workings of the systems which shape it, and imagining the present self to be an uncontrollable and unconscious product of a past from which it cannot escape. This chapter examines Walter Benjamin’s enactment of this contradiction, these polarized ways of engaging with that which has passed. It reads Benjamin’s writing of/with the past in two intertwined forms: as a theoretical problem of his historiographic method (as in his theses “On the Concept of History”), and as an aesthetic question of the representation of memory (as in his autobiographical writing on his formative years in Berlin Childhood Around 1900 and Berlin Chronicle). By moving across genres, my readings will tease out the difficulties and oscillations of the historical in his work, what for Benjamin is its inescapable linguistic valence. The past is nothing but text, and this is especially apparent when Benjamin attempts to write the past and to write about the past. His self-writing amounts to a series of unpublished and fragmentary false starts
and incompletions; his history writing takes form as the “torso” that is *The Arcades Project*, a tissue of quotations and incomplete commentary on 19th century Paris. The fragmentary and partial nature of these texts belie their productiveness and potential applicability as an example and a model for reading modernist self-representations more broadly. By turns examining Benjamin’s autobiographical writing (writing the past) and his various articulations of his historiographical method (writing about the past), this chapter presents Benjamin’s work as dwelling on the threshold between the past as textual-object—as in historical documents, literary texts, cultural detritus discovered by the historiographer—and the past as subject-made-object—as in autobiography, autofiction, masks, self-parody, memoir. By highlighting the valences of this interstitial space between subject and object that Benjamin’s work, across genres, tends to construct, I am working to carve out a site for the readings this dissertation pursues in subsequent chapters. This chapter examines *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* in constellation with a number of vignettes, images, and theoretical articulations from Benjamin’s later writing (*One-Way Street*, *The Arcades Project*, and “On the Concept of History,” in particular), and reads these texts as a constellation, as a series of texts that pursue the same contradictory end—a complex self-representation that can contain the past in a present text. In this way, we can begin to see Benjamin’s dual role in this project, and his applicability for the study of modernist texts: his texts offer both a methodological versatility and an astute and rich literary example. As I hope to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, each of Katherine Mansfield, Gertrude Stein and Laura (Riding) Jackson offers a comparably complex and uneven singularity in their texts. Benjamin helps us to see that, in spite of their diversity, these writers provoke unresolved (or unresolvable) questions about the relation between subjectivity, objectivity and the past—and that the provisional or ambivalent answers their texts proffer point not to a “waste land” of meaninglessness but to a space of productive ambiguity that both reveals and unsettles the social and aesthetic systems and the linguistic and generic structures passed down through time.
Throughout this project, Benjamin serves a dual role: as a signal example of the complexities of self-representation in the modernist moment, and as a source of language to articulate, complicate, and politicize the textual enactments of which he is a part, and for which he provides a guide. His texts are both theory and practice, in an entanglement I am interested in intensifying rather than attenuating. I will do so by reading against generic expectations, focusing on the movement of objectivity in Benjamin’s explicit self-writing, and on the conscious and unconscious insertions of subjectivity in his theoretical articulations. For his part, Benjamin frames his textualizations as a practice akin to an archaeologist, a figure whose orientation represents for Benjamin the unresolved oscillation between subject and object in examinations of the past. He allegorizes the role in his *Berlin Chronicle*, a text written in 1932 and exemplary of the interpenetration of theory and practice in his work more generally. Benjamin argues,

> Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination of what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one’s discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding itself. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in old ones delve to ever-deeper layers. (25-26)
As he does in his articulation of the dialectical image in *The Arcades Project*, to which I will turn below, Benjamin here moves subtly between objectivity and subjectivity: he uses language, its irreducible complexity, as a starting point in identifying the use of memory—or more precisely its role as the “theater” of the past, rather than its express articulation. In approaching his own past, the autobiographer’s role is that of both the historian and the archaeologist, in Benjamin’s estimation: to seek out truth not through a particular political agenda, but through a chance operation of digging. Importantly, Benjamin specifies that this is most productive when the autobiographer returns to the same ground again and again—so that time and space are imbricated. In this way, the “plan” he points to is one of orientation, of openness to possibilities of meaning, rather than of intent or narrative. Once the fragments are drawn from the ground, they are decontextualized and presented as “images, severed from all earlier associations.” In a dialectical turn, for Benjamin this provisional operation does more to pay respect to the act of memory and memorialization—that “cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam”—than does the construction of a “narrative” or a “report” of one’s findings. The act of digging “ever-deeper” is paramount, less because of what it might reveal about the digger than about the ground within which the autobiographer “probes.”

However, in Benjamin’s texts the past is a ground ever unstable, even before the archaeologist begins his excavation. Poststructuralist critic Carol Jacobs says of *Berlin Chronicle*:

> It is difficult to orient ourselves in this text, even if we heed Benjamin’s admonition to renounce the center, difficult to find points of entry, to locate a place for commentary as a vantage point from which to contemplate, a window perhaps, a threshold that might open before us the slate of Benjamin’s text. But these, after all, are the neither here nor therers, the borderlines from which all critical writing inevitably takes place. (25)

As Crystal Bartolovich has pointed out, Jacobs’ critical orientation here tends to disallow a Marxist materialism—ignoring Benjamin’s critique of “class” that is always directed
against “a totality hegemonized by capitalism” (171)—but Jacobs does usefully limn the complexity of reading Benjamin’s texts: they are multi-vocal and multi-local, always at the “borderline” where meaning is always and ever provisional. Whether in the form of an esotericism in his “Epistemo-critical Prologue” to The Origins of German Tragic Drama, or in the form of suggestive but incomplete juxtapositions of textual fragments in The Arcades Project, Benjamin’s work consistently destabilizes totalized readings, while at the same time tantalizing with details and images that gesture towards some objective truth—and thereby towards a potential political program. Indeed, critics as diverse as Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Susan Buck-Morss, Gerhard Richter, Max Pensky, Michael Jennings, Michael Löwy, Terry Eagleton, and Jürgen Habermas have examined the ways Benjamin reframes and thereby undercuts received knowledge, showing that this is both his productiveness and his difficulty as an object of study.  

This project does not expressly dispute the extant scholarship on Benjamin’s historiographical method and on his autobiographical work; I will explore a number of these readings in this chapter, following the central line of thought in the arguments and reinforcing their articulations of Benjamin’s complicated relationship to German Idealism, to Marxism and to Exegetical Judaism. However, I venture that there is a gap this project begins to fill, which is the suggestion that the complexities of Benjamin’s texts point us back to the subjective, to the question of self-representation as an oscillation between the self and its historical objects. Indeed, the writer is the intermediary, since it is Benjamin’s autobiographical texts in particular that elicit invocations of “difficulty” from readers like Jacobs—a form of Roland Barthes’ writerly text, perhaps. In fact, my own approach to Benjamin’s work further complicates his politics: the objective truth presented is always provisional, always conditioned by the

subject who presents it, so that any politics we might identify is built on a particular moment of exploration and problematization. As such, Benjamin’s autobiographical texts point us towards the process of seeking the past, the writerly act of representing the “objective” past, so that “churning” the ground becomes the objectivity we seek.

For his part, Benjamin avoids explicitly laying out a political program for his work; as he avers in a 1916 letter to Martin Buber:

My conception of straightforward and at the same time highly political style and writing is to indicate that which fails words, only there, only where this sphere of wordlessness reveals itself in its unspeakably pure power, can the magic spark between word and deed arise. (80)

It is not, then, about clarity; Benjamin sees a complicated politics in the act of seeking (and seeking to construct) texts that gesture towards that which is unreadable—or which “indicate” that words fail, and where and how they fail. As Gerhard Richter suggests about Benjamin’s archaeologist in his study of Benjamin’s “autobiographical poetics” (42),

in the moment of churning Benjamin invokes, the particular sedimentation of memory, the very topography that needs to be articulated, is also destroyed. For what the churning leaves behind forms new and unexpected sedimentations that, when churned again by the archaeologist of the self, will yield rather different images of the past. Each time the layers of memory are thus accessed to articulate, through disconnected images, archaeological fragments broken out of context, a certain past of a specifiable somebody, their particular rhetorical constellation is also disrupted and shuffled. As Benjamin suggests, the same text of history can never be read more than once, as it will always become something else in subsequent readings. There can never be a self that possesses a stable past that can be fully emplotted at will. (44-45)

Benjamin’s orientation towards his own memories, as a space that both reveals and obscures the autobiographer’s subjectivity, allows for a complicated and ever-moving self-representation—building texts that oscillate between unveiling the workings of the
"theater" of language and history and re-covering the "emplotted" bourgeois subject, while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of the task.

The work of Benjamin's archaeologist is not one of building up, nor of tearing down; rather, in the act of "churning," he presents the complications and instabilities of the ground of modernity, carefully "probing" to discover, uncover, recover that which has been lost, obscured, and destroyed. What is revealed, invariably, is a series of what Benjamin calls "dialectical images" of the past—complicated constellations always and ever directed against capitalist oppressions and towards revolution. In this movement between subject and object, in this oscillation that works to undermine the fixity of ideological categories, for Benjamin the past is always a space (an array or constellation, a ground or screen) and a text (a tissue of "useless" concepts, opaque allegories), and this dualism constitutes both the past's accessibility and its irrecoverability as a whole, separate object. Benjamin's work places the writer, the critic, the historian, the autobiographer in the role of excavator, as the figure that will dig into the past, draw out text, and reveal structure—both in the staging of his or her "dark joy" in the digging (the subjective element) and in the "scatter[ing] [of] earth," in the microcosmic truth the fragments withdrawn tell us about the ground itself (the objective element). The oscillation of critic and subject matter in Benjamin's articulation of the dialectical image reveals the oscillation of self and history. As Richter implies, there can be no total history just as there can be no total self—but this limit itself reveals structure: the

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13 Benjamin ends the introductory section of his "artwork" essay as follows, imagining a critical efficaciousness in a politicized inutility:

The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art. ("Reproduction" 218)
contradictions of our present selves cannot be resolved by digging into our pasts, only intensified.\(^\text{14}\)

I would suggest that the political consequences of this intensification are significant, though they work through negation, aporia, and apocalypticism. Benjamin sought the possibility that this intensification of contradiction, wrought through the dialectical image, would break new ground for the coming revolution, pushing a temporal break. In his theses “On the Concept of History” he offers the historical materialist—an analogue, I suggest, to the archaeologist above—as the catalyst for a stark transition from “homogenous, empty time” served by the triumphalist narratives of the victors to “now-time” deeply but unevenly embedded in the untold texts of the past (395). The melancholy of his Angel of History, to which I will turn below, comes from the fact that he cannot initiate this break, only observe and write about the gaps and fissures where revolution becomes possible. According to Michael Löwy in his study of Benjamin’s “theses” on history, the uncertainty and melancholy of Benjamin’s revolutionary methodology represents “a new heretical Marxism” that is

radically different from all the—orthodox or dissident—variants of his time. A ‘messianic Marxism’ which could not but arouse, as Benjamin himself had predicted, perplexity and incomprehension. But also, above all, a Marxism of unpredictability: if history is open, if “the new” is possible, this is because the future is not known in advance; the future is not the ineluctable result of a given historical evolution, the necessary and predictable outcome of the “natural” laws of social transformation, the inevitable fruit of economic, technical or scientific progress—or, worse still, the continuation, in ever more perfect forms, of the same, of what already exists, of actually existing modernity, of the current economic and social structures. (109)

\(^{14}\) This intensification of contradiction reaches a dizzying height in the case of Gertrude Stein, as I will explore in Ch.3 below.
Benjamin’s methodology constructs a space of “wordlessness” and “useless” concepts, an impossibility and a never-to-arrive apocalypse, yet the productiveness of his method is precisely in its inutility and its futility. His is the methodological counterpoint to what he calls in the “Paralipomena” to his theses on history the “inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished” (406)—to our received narratives of history. In his self-representations, Benjamin “churns” to the surface not new emplotments, but new revelations about what structures the old narratives. In the complexity of those selves in text—those objects of both the past and present—Benjamin carves out a space, a “theater,” upon which the old stories gain no purchase, upon which the self-same, liberal bourgeois subject cannot stand. Instead, he offers us images of the forgotten detritus of memory (a history in miniature), then digs them up again, making fragments of fragments. What we are left with is a gesture, an empty space, a decontextualized image—but therein lies the possibility for a new world, for a break from “more of the same.” It is a melancholy (and potentially violent) image too: the ground we “churn” is the very ground upon which we stand.

The Angel of History

Unpacking the dense imagery at work in Benjamin’s oft-cited ninth thesis of “On the Concept of History”—the Angel of History—further points to the critical implications of the broader work this dissertation pursues. This reading returns us to the centrality of two competing (and yet overlapping) tensions or dialectics in Benjamin’s work, and in modernist self-writing more broadly: between past and present, and between subject and object. As I explore above in the figure of the archaeologist, Benjamin suggests that these oscillations of past/present and subject/object can come together in the critical act of “churning” that turns these unresolved tensions towards a critique of received social structures reproduced through language. What is implied in this allegory of the autobiographical act—the revolutionary violence of destabilizing the ground upon which
one’s present self makes its stand—is broadened into a dialectical image of historical materialism in Benjamin’s ninth thesis on history. Benjamin’s Angel of History is the materialist counterpart to his archaeologist autobiographer. Indeed, as Max Pensky has suggested, the Angel of History allegorizes the oscillatory nature of the broader historiographic project that occupied Benjamin throughout the 1930s (16-17). At the same time, I suggest that the Angel of History aphoristically thematizes a central problematic of modernism writ large: the incommensurability of the liberal bourgeois subject to its received histories, an incommensurability that I argue is productive of a broad range of formal innovations throughout the period. This unresolved oscillation points up what Benjamin saw as the barbarousness that undergirded the discourse of progress dominant in the interwar years. What is at stake in these structural interactions—the ideological as played out on the “historical” subject, the aesthetic as enacted through formal experimentation, and the political as demonstrated by the triumphalist narrative of the Third Reich—is a fraught definition of artistic praxis. This contestation involved seeking after a provisional sketch of the interrelationship between artistic production, critical reflection, and political action in a particular historical moment. As subsequent chapters will show, each of Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson found a different site for this contestation—but all three, along with Benjamin, repeatedly traced over the ground of this problem: how to write the self without succumbing to the comfortable narratives of the bourgeois subject? It was for Benjamin an impossibly dense and complex project, one that occupied him up to his suicide in September 1940.

A close look at Benjamin’s most iconic of dialectical images begins to unravel these threads. “There is a picture by Klee,” Benjamin tells us, “called Angelus Novus.”:

It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at
his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (“On the Concept of History” 392).

Benjamin opens with a description of Klee’s drawing that highlights its inherent torsion: the angel “seems about to move away.” There is a temporary passivity here, an openness to what “he stares at.” Likewise, “his mouth is open” and “his wings are spread”—pointing to an unfulfilled desire both to speak (or cry out) and to escape. The angel is marked thus with both stasis and movement, with both a contemplative sense of retrospect (“his eyes are wide”) and a melancholic desire to move on from that contemplation (“his mouth is open”). Benjamin then draws a distinction between the angel and “us”: we see a “chain of events,” and he “sees one single catastrophe.” Rather than a vertical and hierarchical narrative of history—what Benjamin describes in the Paralipomena to his theses on history as “the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished” (406)—the angel is oriented towards a horizontal, spatialized sense of the past. On this view, both big and small events are contained within the “catastrophe,” and they are held in tension rather than normalized in a causal narrative. The angel’s horror-stricken eyes cannot but discern the triumphalist history with which we have been bequeathed, that “pile of debris” that continues to grow—yet from this pile Benjamin’s historical materialist can begin to discern the subtle relations between elements, can reveal in a flash of revelation the “truth” of the storm of progress. Indeed, what makes this image dialectical is precisely this interpenetration of incommensurable oppositions: contained within dominant and progressive conceptions of history are the seeds of capitalism’s destruction. The angel sees in this historical detritus the inherent instability of dominant structures—an undermining and splitting from within the very concepts and practices that make hierarchy possible. And we can begin to see this dialectical tension between movement (of progress, of the angel’s wings, of
[self]destruction) and stasis (of the image, of the angel’s sight, of dominant structure) in structures of power as we peer through the subjective glance of Benjamin’s angel.

While the angel perceives this potential for destruction, for Benjamin this inherent instability of dominant ideology is an objective phenomenon. In another irresolvable tension, Benjamin’s historical materialist has a certain orientation towards his object of study (the historical as such), but he reveals an objective truth via that materialism. I argue that what we might call the “irresistib[ility]” of vision is a crucial element in Benjamin’s construction of the Angel of History—a doubled notion that functions both as an image he presents and as a particular orientation towards the past. For Benjamin the angel “must look” a certain way to function as a visual adequation of his proposed materialist historiography, just as it “must look” at the rising tide of historical debris that gathers before him because the storm of progress is forcing his wings open. Benjamin is pointing up his own complicity in the project: the two “must[s]” set up a parallel between the subject who studies history (and has a certain political orientation towards it) and the object of study (a past which is extant whether or not one is looking at it). What is catastrophic in the “pile of debris” is not merely the vicissitudes of historical injustice—most clearly demonstrated in Benjamin’s historical moment by the fascist rationalization of atrocity under National Socialism—but also the ideological underpinnings of culture by which all oppression is carried out. In other words, the subject who studies history is also the object of that history, no matter how far his own political stance may be from the chirpings of the victors. Thus, contradictorily, the angel is part of the debris he views (even as he works to keep his distance with his “barge pole”), because his worldview and his subjectivity are determined in part by his historical inheritances; as he works to reframe them, to reveal their inner workings, he reveals his own inner workings: the “objective” and fraught history that unconsciously works upon him.
Finally, the gathering point for this contradiction between subject and object, on the stage of history, is Benjamin himself—so that the Angel of History is also a self-portrait, a sort of autobiography. The messianic language Benjamin employs in his description belies the stridently personal nature of this image; it is not merely a metaphysical meditation on the dialectic of past and present, subject and object. On one level, we can read Benjamin as the Angel of History, staring with horror-stricken eyes at his imminent destruction at the hands of the Nazis, at his own complicity as a member of a progress-oriented bourgeoisie whose class privilege made and make possible the conditions for fascism. Not long after completing his theses on history (the last “complete” text he produced), Benjamin fled south as the German army marched on Paris. While spending a month in hiding in Marseille—before crossing the Pyrenees to Portbou where he took his own life—Benjamin followed the progress of the war with horror and fear. As he tells Adorno in his last letter to his long-time friend, “I am condemned to read every newspaper [...] as a summons addressed to me, and to hear the voice of the bringer of ill tidings in every radio program” (qtd. in Eiland and Jennings 443). We can equate Benjamin’s receptivity to “catastrophe” here with the doubled sense of what the Angel of History “must see”: these “ill tidings” are both a flood of historical inevitability (he is “summon[ed]” and then “condemned” to a fate from which he cannot flee) and a subjective desire for wholeness (the angel’s desire to “make whole what has been smashed”). This is not a precise correspondence, however: the Benjamin who has fled—the hopeless figure he projects in his final letters, the man who overdoses on morphine days before securing his escape to the US, the tragic thinker constructed again and again by critical biographers and readers of his work—is given over, undialectically, to the dystopia of a fascist “end of history.” Benjamin’s sense of the “summons addressed to me” is a singular narrative, a teleological progression towards death as the ultimate closure; in this sense, it is a model of history wholly other to the dialectical image of the Angel of History. Yet we can also identify in the figure of the Angel of History, and in the textual complexities of Benjamin’s written self,
oppositions and tensions that are not so easily resolved—contradictions that spin out to new conceptions of history and the self that don’t close upon death in quite so abrupt a manner.

In what Angeliki Spiropoulou has aptly named a “constellatory method” (4), I am pushing towards a model of reading modernist writers, Benjamin included, as Angels of History, as irreducibly complex figures that construct selves in their writing that demonstrably do not work with received history in any self-identical and resolvable way. As we shall see below, the childhood memories Benjamin pulls up and repurposes as images offer a powerful critique of the bourgeois subject writ large, and they articulate a melancholic self-doubt about Benjamin’s own complicity in the violence wrought by the maintenance of privilege, a self-critique that is never comfortably resolved. Indeed, the incommensurability and the oscillation is precisely the point—and it is an irreducible tension intimately connected to the political and historical contexts of his work, as it is for Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson. I am offering the figure and figuration of Walter Benjamin as the example par excellence of these productive tensions between subjective self-analysis and objective critique of present conditions. What this sort of reading reveals is an oscillation between the canniness of modernist self-identification, on the one hand, and an unconscious inurement in capitalist development, to the reproduction of inherited ideologies of the self and of knowledge production, on the other hand. What Benjamin’s theory of history begins to reveal, then, are the indirect but no less profound correspondences—identifiable in a moment along a narrative of history—between explicit refashonings of the past by thinkers such as Benjamin and the intense self-exploration of contemporaneous writers. Like “make it new,” Benjamin’s call in his sixteenth thesis on history to “blast open the continuum of history” (396) is a doubled imperative: to withdraw and display in the form of an image heretofore ignored or misread material from the past, and to “churn” the ground from which the material is drawn. Like Ezra Pound’s injunction, too, Benjamin’s
Historiography pushes dialectically for a rereading of the present, of present selves, through the past. It is a method very much of its time, indeed steeped in its historical moment—which means that a synchronic “blast[ing]” of this sort functions not only descriptively (as an attempt to recharacterize a past moment, to change its causal relation to its own past) but also prescriptively—as a politicized intervention into our own presumptions towards history. The impetus behind Benjamin’s complex historiographical project—like that of modernism—is no less acute here in the second decade of the twenty-first century: even if our subject matter has shifted, the matter of the subject is yet to be resolved. And if the tensions inherent in Benjamin’s dialectical image of the Angel of History offer a lesson, it is that this resolution is always yet to come, a resolution that is set in motion, dialectically, as soon as it proposes a closure. In this provisionality—combined with a focus on and an incredulity to the atrocities of the past and its determinations in the present—I see in modernist self-representations a number of Angels of History, writers who “must see” their own histories as part of large and uneven totality, even as they work to unravel it.

**Memorializing a Berlin Childhood**

Benjamin’s longest and most polished autobiographical document, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, never published in his lifetime, is his most complex attempt at self-representation. Its writing coincides with the solidification of Benjamin’s materialist method in the 1930s. It features vignettes in and around Berlin, presented through the eyes of a middle class boy, but in the register of a recollecting adult. As I will pursue in more depth in my examination of Mansfield’s late fiction, especially, the reconstruction of the past here functions at the level both of tortured self-examination and of cool and detached historical evaluation. I suggest that the politics of these mediations are subtle and that they tie in, importantly, to the body—or, rather, these mediations move through the body and towards the image. Benjamin’s earlier autobiographical texts,
Moscow Diary, “Berlin Chronicle,” and “One-Way Street,” plant the seeds for what culminates in Berlin Childhood: a testing of various selves in writing, the denkebild (or thought-image) as an aphoristic and suggestive form of self-presentation, mediation or interruption of objects, as both markers of class and status and sites of allegorical density. In an unpublished preface to “Berlin Chronicle”—a shorter autobiographical fragment that is much more explicit in its methodology—Benjamin speculates on the effect of the process of politicizing his childhood memories, of imagining a dialectical relation between past experiences (what he calls “biographical traces”) and present contexts, not as a straight-up autobiography so much as a historiographical project:

This procedure is responsible for the fact that the biographical traces, which show themselves more in the continuity than in the depth of experience, step back fully in these attempts. With them the physiognomies—those of my family and comrades. Rather, I have tried to capture the images in which the experience of a metropolis are reflected in a child of the bourgeoisie [...]. I think it possible that such images have their own destiny [...]. The images of my metropolitan childhood are perhaps capable of prefiguring, in their inner realm, later historical experience. (qtd. in Richter 202-3)

In keeping with the “flash of lightning” that constitutes his dialectical materialism, Benjamin rejects historical or subjective narrative (what he calls “continuity”) in favour of “depth of experience” in particular moments, how those moments can be rendered as images that reveal an historical structure. Indeed, Berlin Childhood Around 1900 proceeds as a series of disconnected vignettes rather than a Bildungsroman. And the young Benjamin we encounter in the text is more a disconnected observer than he is a participant in his own narrative: he is continuously reacting to visual stimuli, but never in the expected way. Benjamin likens his role as autobiographer to that of a photographer, “captur[ing] the images” rather than constructing them.
This is a conceit, I suggest, that belies his role as historical arbiter—as interpreter of the “objective” structures that so powerfully influenced him as a young child. In the main text of “Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin asserts,

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form that they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form—it may be called fleeting or eternal—is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. And this is shown not so much by the role that my own life plays here, as by that of the people closest to me in Berlin—whoever and whenever they may have been. The atmosphere of the city that is here evoked allots them only a brief, shadowy existence. They steal along its walls like beggars, appear wraithlike at windows, to vanish again, sniff at thresholds like a genius loci, and even if they fill whole quarters with their names, it is as a dead man’s fills his gravestone. (612-13)

As with his historical materialism, Benjamin seeks in his autobiographical writing to break with a notion of “a continuous flow of life”—focusing instead on “moments and discontinuities.” This anti-narrative stance, this focus on “space,” is intended to reveal the histories and ideologies that structure the scene presented, and the scene of writing. Benjamin, as child in the moment and as autobiographer capturing that moment, constructs himself and “the people closest to [him] in Berlin” as historical objects—as nodes in a constellation or as points projected on a screen. Taken together with his other self-writing in the 1930s, then, we can begin to see Berlin Childhood Around 1900 as a further critique of bourgeoisie inheritances. In this case, as he constructs his embodied experiences into images, Benjamin’s own upbringing is ripped from its context for the revelations it might bring to light of “later historical experiences.” My method here of reading Benjamin’s autobiographical work as dialectical images that momentarily suspend moments of experience and presents them as flashes of revelation offers a subjective expansion of Benjamin’s highly politicized
articulation of his “procedure” and of its effects. The subject’s politics can be glimpsed in the acute experience of the moment, if only provisionally, as a “shadowy” sort of afterimage. This ghostliness and this ambiguity does not result in meaninglessness, however; it points to a dialectical sense of criticism (Benjamin reading his own past) as the image space where the theoretical joins with the experiential—a practice that holds both in tension, that continuously oscillates between showing and telling, presenting and explaining.

The clearest image of Benjamin’s method—as a critical orientation and as a politics of reading—can be found in “The Sock,” a short interlude towards the middle of the Berlin Childhood, where Benjamin presents a childhood obsession with balled-up stockings as an allegory for the work of the historical materialist. In what Benjamin identifies as a proto-critical act, the young Benjamin “thrust [his] hand as deeply as possible into [the] interior,” into the “pocket” of the sock ball, and then proceeded to “unwrap the present” (96-7): a woolen sock. The relevance of this scene for Benjamin is that the “pocket” is an illusion created by the rolling of the socks, an illusion Benjamin repeatedly revealed to himself as he unrolled it. Benjamin sees these sock balls as an analogy for ideology—indeed, for the aura of bourgeois propriety—and the unwrapping as an act of ideological or aesthetic critique:

I could not repeat the phenomenon often enough. It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same. It led me to draw truth from works of literature as warily as the child’s hand retrieved the sock from “the pocket.” (97)

In a dialectical move, Benjamin imbricates form and content, subject and object, and in doing so suggests that ideological constructs are in fact empty of content (beyond the forms they take) yet are no less wondrous for their pure formalism. Further, for Benjamin the wonder-filled yet wary investigation of these structures—the unrolling that reveals an irreducible and inherent emptiness at the centre of the construct—is parallel to the work of the critic, especially Benjamin himself in The Arcades Project:
pulling stubbornly but “warily” at those commonplace aspects of bourgeois culture to track down the underlying forms that structure it and make it wondrous. So, as he plays with a neatly stacked pile of balled-up stockings, the young Benjamin is in fact lifting the veil of ideology to discover the “truth”: there is only veil. “The Sock” clearly demonstrates the way Benjamin juxtaposes this childhood wonderment with a present-day concern with objective political “truths”—projecting upon his younger self a canny understanding of the function of objects in the social world, and a sense of receptivity to those structures that might be revealed even by these most mundane of phenomena. And the target is always the same: bourgeois culture, the ways in which Benjamin rejects it while acknowledging, even celebrating, his inurement in it—in a rejigging, perhaps, of the Angel’s melancholic compulsion to continuously look at that which horrifies him. As with the sock, in ideological critique the ecstasy of discovery can only come from the understanding that one’s own subjective experience is the structuring mechanism for the ideology of one’s class—and the critic must accept his own participation and complicity in oppression, even at the level of identity. “The Sock” can be read as an unfolding of Benjamin’s method of self-presentation in *Berlin Childhood*, and in his self-writing more generally: he continuously explores and pushes at the limits of his own subjectivity, even while affirming the bankruptcy and emptiness of the history it implies. In the construction of dialectical images, subjective identification is a necessary dialectical step in unraveling the bourgeois subject as such—in spite of the possible pain and self-evacuation it may require.

Rapid technologization, infiltrating bourgeois sitting rooms across Europe at the turn of the century, provides another privileged site in *Berlin Childhood* for this doubled acceptance and disavowal of received ideology. Benjamin’s recollection of his family’s first telephone, the technological “apparatus” that somehow becomes a feeling body—and nearly a member of the family—as it enters the bourgeois household symbolizes for Benjamin a childhood wonder coupled with a wariness towards potential violence:
Each day and every hour, the telephone was my twin brother. I was an intimate observer of the way it rose above the humiliations of its early years. For once the chandelier, fire screen, potted palm, console table, guéridon, and alcove balustrade—all formerly on display in the front room—had finally faded and died a natural death, the apparatus, like a legendary hero once exposed to die in a mountain gorge, left the dark hallway in the back of the house to make its regal entry into the cleaner and brighter rooms that now were inhabited by a younger generation. For the latter, it became a consolation for their loneliness. To the despondent who wanted to leave this wicked world, it shone with the light of a last hope. With the forsaken, it shared its bed. Now, when everything depended on its all, the strident voice it had acquired in exile was grown softer. (48)

As an image, set in relation to other domestic objects “on display in the front room,” the telephone signifies the intensification of communication technologies at the turn of the century. As he argues in the artwork essay, for Benjamin this transition culminates in a technologized and thereby reproducible art that reverberates politically in the “wither[ing]” of the aura and the concomitant possibility of a revolutionary aesthetics (224). But in Berlin Childhood Benjamin also offers a strange development narrative, where the telephone garners the status of “legendary hero” who must rise above the other accoutrements of the bourgeois household by waiting for those objects to die a “natural death” and then finding the “light” of the front room. Benjamin parallels the struggles of this epic journey with his own fledgling childhood development, the pain of which is softened by the trappings of middle class privilege (light, beauty, aura), in the same way that the telephone’s voice “was grown softer.” When experienced as more than a voice, however, the telephone’s status as “legendary hero”—as harbinger of modernity and, likewise, as allegory of bourgeois adulthood—transmutes into villainy for the child who first experiences its phantasmagorical effects when he attempts to answer the ring:

When, having mastered my sense with great effort, I arrived to quell the uproar after prolonged fumbling through the gloomy corridor, I tore off the two receivers, which were heavy as dumbbells, thrust my head between them, and was inexorably delivered over to the voice that now
sounded. There was nothing to allay the violence with which it pierced me. (49-50)

As the telephone “obliterate[s]” the young Benjamin’s “consciousness of time,” it also stages the subject’s transition from childhood to adulthood, and by extension the transition from fin de siècle to modernity. A bildungsroman of the telephone is imbricated here with the shock and violence that same technology registers upon the body as it fulfills its destiny: to be instrumentalized in the capitalist “machine,” so to speak. The dialectical image—in this case a self-portrait of the liberal-bourgeois subject—moves between a Benjamin who defends technology as catalyst for political change (specifically ideological change) and a Benjamin who is “pierced” by the change the apparatus brings about in his comfortably appointed bourgeois household. Just as there is a danger in the withering of aura—the “aestheticization of political life” (“Reproducibility” 121)—Benjamin’s image of himself as a child surrounded and penetrated by the imposing apparatus of the telephone points to pitfalls of both full identification with the class in which one is born and outright rejection of it, a revelation earned through narrativization on the one hand and violence on the other.

In considering Berlin Childhood as a whole, what stands out is its most modernist of aesthetic qualities: the text is open, disjunctive, and paratactic—a series of vignettes with little (besides setting) to link them together. Gerhard Richter has identified a political consistency in suggesting that “there is no page of the Berlin Childhood that is not touched by the images and threats of fascism” (201), and Benjamin saw a totality of technique and effect—telling Gershom Scholem in a 1933 letter that the text represents “the most precise portrait I shall ever be able to give of myself” (424). But little in the text directly explains what brings the vignettes together; instead, the reader is left to do the linking, to draw his or her own conclusions. The one moment in Berlin Childhood when Benjamin brings his images together reads as follows:

I never saw him. It was he who always saw me. He saw me in my hiding places and before the cage of the otter, on a winter morning and by the
telephone in the pantry, on the Brauhausberg with its butterflies and on my skating rink with the music of the brass band. He has long since abdicated. Yet his voice, which is like the hum of the gas burner, whispers to me over the threshold of the century: “Dear little child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too.” (122)

Benjamin condenses much into this small passage that functions as a conclusion to the text. The hunchback to which he refers comes from an earlier passage where a young Benjamin imagines another world and another race of individuals living in basement apartments that are only visible through grates in the sidewalks along the busy streets of Berlin. Benjamin offers the hunchback as an allegory for the oppressed working classes who literally are subordinated to the movement of the bourgeoisie. Of course, the figure takes on a much more mythical status here: the hunchback is an observer and overseer as the young Benjamin encounters those strange moments which enthral the child (other vignettes from the text—the sock, the telephone, the otter, the butterflies, the skating rink, and so on). Benjamin’s expansion here figures the hunchback as an accusing yet sympathetic representation of class conflict, played out as an ideological self-questioning, and as a multivalent culminating image for the text as a whole. That “hum of the gas burner”—like the violence housed in the telephone—is a dialectical imbrication of class identification and nascent ideological critique: full knowledge can only be assumed (the young Benjamin “never saw him”), but the hunchback’s voice, the voice of received power structures and of the class divisions that allow for bourgeois privilege, asks for prayer, for understanding, sympathy, belief. In its disembodied “whisper [...] over the threshold of the century,” that voice is the self-reflecting Benjamin, the archaeological autobiographer “churning” the ground. That “whisper” is also the reader’s. Indeed, we are in the realm of Baudelaire’s “hypocrite lecteur”: the montage of images in the text comes together in the figure of the hunchback—or more precisely, what the hunchback “saw”—so that the reader is interpellated as that hunchback, as the watcher whose gaze is not returned. In this way, the hunchback is an allegorical tool that explains by linking together Benjamin’s childhood experience, and it
is an alienating presence that distances the reader/viewer from full identification with the narrative of development staged in the text. With the hunchback, Benjamin presents a dialectical image of a bourgeois childhood as a series of juxtaposed experiences, viewed from a distance and from below—a method that makes Benjamin’s “self” in the text and the reader/viewer complicit, both in the wonder and in the violence of class privilege.

In development at the same time, Benjamin’s theses “On the Concept of History” open, rather than close, with an image of the hunchback—and, like the Angel of History later in the text, the image functions allegorically as both self-portrait and theorization. The first of his “theses” features the “automaton” chess game that is controlled in secret by “a little hunchback who was an expert chess player.” One can envisage Benjamin channeling his wonderstruck childhood self, caught by the “hum of the gas burner,” when he imagine[s] a philosophical counterpart to this apparatus [the automaton]. The puppet, called “historical materialism,” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight. (389)

This image allegorizes Eagleton’s assessment of Benjamin as a critic who manages to bring together Marxist thinking and Judaism: Benjamin presents the work of the revolutionary thinker as tawdry kitsch—as the work of the circus faker that hides his tell (his Marxist dialectical materialism) by “enlist[ing] the services of theology.” But that faker is a seemingly absent figure, a hidden hunchback pulling the strings and presenting his puppet as his outward self. As we will see below, Benjamin constructs his concept of the dialectical image—his theoretical term for the proper work of the historical materialist—on precisely this ambiguous axis: the historian is simultaneously absent and

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15 For an attempt to account for the historical conditions of what Eagleton calls Benjamin’s “strange blendings” of Idealism and materialism, see his Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism 81-2.
present, as an invisible agent/author of the text who is still the initiator of the revolutionary effect of the work. As a commencement (in his “theses”) or as a culmination (in his autobiographical text), then, Benjamin turns to the seemingly non-material, to prayer theology—but, in a powerful contradiction, in the form of a lowly hunchback—to work towards the presentation of history that accounts not only for historical exigencies unforeseeable in the moment, but also for the depth the most mundane of moments can have for a child bound to become a subject, a body inevitably subject to the vicissitudes of modernity. For Benjamin materiality and the body cannot explain or encompass the totality of experience—yet the spiritual dimension, the hunchback for whom he prays, is inevitably beyond representation or comprehension. The play of secrecy and revelation houses itself in the telling allegory above: a watcher observes yet does not understand what makes the “game” of history work—and the historian cannot but play along, using the puppet to reveal the workings of ideology and power. In the image, the sources of the knowledge (marginal and ignored historical data, the desires of the working classes, the dialectical materialist himself) are kept “out of sight.” In Berlin Childhood, Benjamin presents his own childhood self as that puppet, and the problematically “objective” technique of the dialectical image—and by extension, the “small and ugly” Benjamin himself—as the puppet-master. As I have suggested above, this dialectical process manifests itself in revelations about the violence that capitalistic development (as ideology and as technology) enacts on the body and the spirit, but also about the possibilities for revolution inherent in the same moment.

16 In “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” Fredric Jameson points out that Benjamin’s image of the chess-playing automaton corresponds to a basic tension in Judaic messianism, proposing that Benjamin “offers the supreme example of the intellectual committed to revolutionary values in a world in which revolution cannot be expected to happen” and that this contradiction “gives its relevance and energy to the basic figure through which [Benjamin] was accustomed to think this impossibility” (176): the hunchback. For an in-depth examination of the role of Judaism on Benjamin’s thought, as it relates to Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx especially, see Jameson “Marx’s Purloined Letter” 175-80.
What this reading of *Berlin Childhood* points to is the versatility and insight of a Benjaminian critical method, the power of which is, in part, a product of its provisionality, its in-betweenness. As Ansin Rabinbach suggests, “What blasts history open, what rends its fabric, is not a counter- or micro-narrative, but those gnomish, negative forms which by their fragmentary nature arrest the continuity of narrative itself” (128). Even when the fragments Benjamin is working with are his own memories, and therefore inevitably fraught with an irreducible subjectivity, objective political truths can be momentarily recognized—in the disruptions of the narrative surface, the formal effect of the juxtapositions. Benjamin’s is a critique of ideology *par excellence*, and it is so because it is filtered through the self—not as a mode of confession or self-justification, but with an understanding of the problematics and the possibilities of the subjective register. In the context of my project, a reading of Benjamin’s autobiographical writing can begin to uncover the *use-value* of the method he articulates in “Konvolut N” of *The Arcades Project*, to show the ways even the most subjective and the most obscure of knowledges—framed in a dialectical way—can posit new connections that posit new ideological configurations. Benjamin’s autobiographical writing suggests that there is no outside to ideology, even when one wishes to build an ideological critique. Indeed, ideology is as far inside ourselves, in our very cores, as it is outside, in an abstract and unrepresentable reality.17 Benjamin’s critique of the modern subject bears strongly in this tension, as we can begin to see in *Berlin Childhood* how subjective experience, in the form of childhood memories, reveals deep and ostensibly objective political realities, but always in this case filtered through the ecstatic and imaginative eyes of a child who does not understand the political implications of what he observes and experiences. This representation is further complicated by the methodological questions weighing heavily on Benjamin at the time of writing the *Berlin Childhood* (aura, historical materialism, dialectical image), questions that play into his

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meditations in the form of parallels, condensations, and constellations. In this way, Benjamin’s writing of self-as-child is also a writing of self-as-critic—subject positions which are continuously juxtaposed in the text. The dialectical image they create is an ever-moving engagement with the language and the history of bourgeois culture that is also a shaking of the foundations of received knowledge. The childhood Benjamin had only a glimmer of the future in his early encounters with Berlin; likewise, a “mature” Benjamin reflects back on those glimmers and sees them, finally, for their “objective” political possibilities.

The Dialectical Image

A reading of Walter Benjamin's autobiographical texts reveals the inherent contradictions of an ideological critique of the self: one cannot achieve a comfortable, indeed auratic, distance from the subject matter. At the same time, however, reframed moments of tension—staged as a series of complex images—can set up the conditions for momentary flashes of revelation. Benjamin claims in “One-Way Street” in 1928 that "criticism is a matter of proper distancing" (476)—an ideal to be sought after, I would argue, rather than permanently secured. On the other hand, Benjamin claims, “Today the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen” (476). He asks, finally, “What, in the end makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt” (476). In an early incarnation of his theory of “aura” developed more fully in the “work of art” essay, Benjamin develops a conceit here of advertisement as a more fully materialized form of criticism, as a trained response to art objects that more accurately reflects the material conditions from which it springs. If aura is “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (“Reproducibility” 104-5), advertising—like the
ringing telephone in Benjamin’s Berlin household—is the collapse of that distance, marked by an inherent violence that pulls the viewer out of his or her complacency. As he does in the work of art essay, Benjamin is here calling for a politicized aesthetic, and for a criticism worthy of the technological acceleration that marked his milieu. He gestures towards this technique in “One-Way Street,” via the subtitling of the juxtaposed *denkebild* (or thought-images) that dominate the text; when not referencing various bourgeois locales of Berlin, Benjamin’s subtitles offer advertising slogans and imperative street signs—“Post no bills” (458); “Germans, Drink German Beer” (458); “No Vagrants!” (486); “This Space for Rent” (476). Indeed, “This space for rent” might be read as a “mercantile” revelation of the openness of “One-Way Street” itself—and of Benjamin’s corpus more broadly: textual ambiguity and oscillation available “for rent”—undercutting the possibility of (property) ownership over critical discourse. In its openness, this image suggests that the tension between critical self-awareness (what is criticism?) and violent experience (a car flying out of a movie screen) is not easily or readily resolved. Benjamin can only gesture towards further contradictions, like the play of mimesis and technology in his image of the “fiery pool” that reflects in wet asphalt below a neon sign. Advertising is of course not an answer to criticism, but neither are traditional forms of criticism adequate responses to the invasiveness of modernity’s textual innovations. The radical openness of Benjamin’s image of the reflecting “neon sign” points to the way that Benjamin's writing offers a visual enactment of theoretical ideas: it is through the problematized subjectivity of the critic (a “fiery” reflection of advertising’s “mercantile gaze”) that "proper distancing" can be temporarily and provisionally achieved.

These tensions—which Benjamin gestures toward in his autobiographical writing, particularly the implications of a problematized critical subjectivity—are given methodological purchase in his concept of the dialectical image. The notion brings together a number of strands in Benjamin’s work in a complex and productive, yet
provisional and temporary, whole: his critique of the subject (both the critic’s own assumed mastery and the modern subject itself); his reframing of the temporal as non-causal and non-sequential, yet saturated with meaning; his politicization of form and structure as a de-naturalizer, both in concert with and as an adjunct to political content; and his engagement with the broadly theological, if perhaps only as a ready-made vocabulary with which to articulate revolutionary thinking. Many critics over the years have identified the dialectical image as central to Benjamin’s late criticism, to his attempt to write a “primal history” of capitalism in the nineteenth-century in _The Arcades Project_ (Benjamin, “Paris” 10). An unfinished opus of quotation and commentary on the cultural rise of capitalism in nineteenth century Paris, the text works to use what Eiland and McLaughlin call the “refuse” and “detritus” of cultural production (ix), to unveil the formal “barbarism” of the era and to identify in those textual objects the origins of possible revolutions in the—and their—future. In a letter in 1930, Benjamin describes the Arcades Project as “the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas” (359). At its most lucid points, Benjamin’s Project fulfills his method, as it juxtaposes quotations from letter-writing manuals and architectural tracts on department stores with his own philosophical reveries on time and messianism, and so on, in a complex admixture of high and low, meditative and reactionary. His juxtaposition of historical/textual material creates something more than the constituent parts: a flash of meaning can often be recognized, even though Benjamin withholds his own interpretation of the individual texts and of the meaning of the juxtapositions.

The closest Benjamin comes to a definition of the dialectical image is in “Konvolut N,” a “sheaf” subtitled “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” which offers a series of aphoristic meditations on history and epistemology. Invoking the concept in a variety of guises throughout the chapter, Benjamin presents the “dialectical image” as a way to strike at stagnant historicist “thinking,” as a dialectical operation founded on the contradiction of movement and stasis:
To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process. (475)

What Benjamin calls the “materialist presentation of history” is the closest analogue to literary criticism in the configuration I am describing—where the “object constructed” places the critic in tension with his or her material, where meaning is produced both through the “natural” meaning of the text and through the critic’s careful construction of a “dialectical image.” The object of study is both found and “constructed,” and the “materialist” critic seeks out the textual moments “where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest,” again not to resolve the tension but to examine the movement of the dialectic. The “arrest of thoughts” is caused by the construction of a “constellation,” an array of information, facts, events, subjects. In this method, no claim is made for a permanent halt, a final truth; instead, the critic focuses on the “caesura” that is readable only as one frame on an ever-moving cinematic reel. As I have suggested, the most prominent opposition in this operation is that between the self and history, between the critic and his or her “subject matter.” In a productive tension, there is a slip between object and subject, as it is the critic who constructs the image that ostensibly reveals an objective “truth” about an historical moment. Indeed, Benjamin’s “materialist” critic is not positioned as the agent in this passage, but is instead the catalyst for the “violent expulsion” of historical detail from the master narrative of received history.  

Benjamin’s sense of the critic’s contradictory relationship to his/her subject matter corresponds in productive ways to T.S. Eliot’s analogy for the depersonalized poet—the “filament”; I will return to this analogy in the concluding chapter of the present project.
As I suggested above, Benjamin’s model of the autobiographer/archaeologist proceeds from the assumption that the subject is constructed through narrative, particularly historical narrative. From this vantage point, the act of re-examining documents of the past with an eye to their unresolvable tensions is a forceful act of self-destruction because it favours instead the “violent expulsion” of the object from progressive development. In other words, the reframing of historical orthodoxy shakes the foundations not only of received power structures but also of the very notion of the modern subject itself, as Gerhard Richter has observed (39). In this sense, the subjectivity of the critic “withers” away as well. But if that tension is thought of as an oscillation, as movement without an ultimate origin or terminus, this act is a powerful form of revisionist history because it breaks the narrative through-line that explains and thereby makes whole the subject. And though it invokes neither the dialectical image nor the subject specifically, Benjamin sixteenth thesis on history reinforces the revolutionary potential of this historiographic operation:

Materialist historiography [...] is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized into a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. (396)

Benjamin’s work as an historian—or, more properly, as a philosopher of history—continuously sought decontextualization and then re-articulation of the past in constellation with the present, made simultaneous in the form of the dialectical image. For Benjamin, a politically-engaged historian carefully chooses material (that which traditionally has been ignored), pulls it from its historical context, and works to present it in a juxtaposition with other similarly decontextualized material, revealing its
emancipatory or even revolutionary potential—not through explanation but through imaginative presentation. Historical detritus is the material Benjamin’s revolutionary historian aims to textualize in a species of surrealist art. By constructing dialectical images in this way, Benjamin pushes for a history that unveils the workings of ideology as a photographer might capture a landscape with his or her camera. And, to recall Benjamin’s sense of the aura, this picture collapses (nearly, but not quite) the “apparition of a distance” between historical moments, offering juxtaposed images rather than linear narratives. The effect of this method on the present—the “objective” truth it might reveal—depends crucially on the political inclinations of the reader or viewer (another form of judgment), on what apocalyptic future he or she may be imagining.

What makes the image produced dialectical is precisely the unresolved tensions of subjectivity in the method, so that the judgments—the way the material is read by the critic as he constructs these images and the way it is read by the reader or viewer consuming them—can be seen as simultaneously objective and subjective. Identifiable meaning oscillates between these poles (subject and object, self and other, past and present), so that the agency and intention of the critic becomes difficult to pin down. Is the “truth” presented preternatural insight, or blind luck? Benjamin offers a methodological process, a way to set this dialectic in motion, further on in “Konvolut N”:

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. (461)

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19 Benjamin’s correspondences with English-speaking modernism—for example, the analogy we might make between the “dialectical image” and Eliot’s “objective correlative” (“Hamlet” 48) or Pound’s “luminous details” (23)—speak loudly, a connection towards which I will gesture in the conclusion. What I want to highlight, at this point, is the more “literary” attributes of Benjamin’s method, here.
Benjamin sees his method as one that “carries over” an aesthetic technique (montage) into a critical process (interpreting the past). What Benjamin seems to be suggesting, here, is that an historian, like the archaeologist/autobiographer, must approach his or her material as a documentarian and as a surrealist, as one who gathers together material and arranges it paratactically. For Benjamin, an historian emphatically is not one who naturalizes the material encountered, nor is he one who mythologizes by developing a narrative trajectory of the past. Rather, Benjamin’s materialist encounters and then juxtaposes those “precisely cut components” and allows them to make meaning. Discovering the “crystal of the total event” is closer to an aesthetic operation, derived from the historian reading what is produced in this juxtaposition, which can then be glimpsed by the reader who encounters the dialectical images constructed by the historian. Indeed, we can see this poetic strategy as a variation on the Poundian injunction to “Make it new.” The chance a modernist innovator like Benjamin takes is presuming that the “total event” will look the same to his readers as it does to him. Indeed, Benjamin’s proposed operation oscillates between—or is a constellation of—a subjective “take” on the past and an objective presentation of it. And the effect of this approach, if successful, is a rehistoricization of the present—in an image that gives the reader/viewer a new sense of present conditions thanks to an anti-progressive reimagining of the past. Benjamin ascribes a broad effect to his method—this “crystal” is an objective truth that transcends progressive, naturalist conceptions of history—suggesting that offering access to documents in a juxtaposed array will ultimately reveal to the viewer unbidden truths of the past (structural and personal). Benjamin avers in a nearby page,

I needn’t say anything. Only show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory, but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (‘Konvolut N” 460)
We can see Benjamin’s doubled historian\(^\text{20}\) as messianic as he constructs (or “discovers” or “mak[es] use of”) dialectical images: somehow incorporeal, ghostlike, and muted, yet centrally important to the present; reliant on receptive readers and viewers; projecting into the future political allies who will see the objective “truth” of Benjamin’s historical moment and will see fit to explain it and, more crucially, to continue the project. As I will explore in subsequent chapters, these confluent tensions of past, present, and future—gathered together, as we have seen, in the represented “self” in a text, as the subject-made-object—help us to identify the politics inherent in contradictory modernist texts.

The key to Benjamin’s method is the pursuit of contradictions, not to resolve or sublate them but to draw out their explanatory power. This effect of his technique can be seen at work in Benjaminian criticism, as well. To return again to the tension between object and subject in Benjamin’s work, I note that Michael Jennings was the first to identify an unresolved political tension in Benjamin’s attempt to problematize the subject in the study of history via the dialectical image; when Benjamin proposes an ostensibly objective method in which the truth “leaps forth” out of the past and disrupts the narrative of history, Jennings claims,

> [t]he truth claims of historicism give way not merely to the different claims of the dialectical image but to the materialist historian’s impulse to rewrite history in such a way that a purgative and redemptive political action ensues. Benjamin’s is a corrective historiography, an attempt to overcome previous ‘barbarism’ and replace it with a concern for the oppressed. The tension between a frankly subjective ethical impulse and the drive to truth is nowhere resolved in the late work. (51)

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\(^{20}\) Benjamin’s ragpicking historian is both like and unlike Eliot’s speaker in the final section of *The Waste Land*, who points to those “fragments” that he has “shored against his ruins”—and who invokes a messianic “cessation of happening” with his “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih” (69). The correspondences and contradictions of this comparison are beyond the scope of my argument here, however—except to suggest that the problematics with which Benjamin was wrestling occupied many intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s.
Jennings is referring to Benjamin’s famous formulation in my epigraph—“There is no document of culture which is not also a document of barbarism”—and sees in Benjamin’s stance against fascism an ethical (subjective) pursuit of (objective) “truth.” In Jennings’ formulation, Benjamin’s imputed “impulse to rewrite history” implies a narrativization, a “corrective historiography” that will leads to “redemptive political action.” But if the rational bourgeois subject, that legacy of the enlightenment that seems to have led us to this alienated modernity under capitalism, is jettisoned, who is left to do the correcting? What can objective truth do without a critic to articulate it? Disputing this desire to “resolve” Benjamin’s work, Pensky is right to argue that the tension Jennings identifies here refers back to the deepest and truest sources of Benjamin’s frozen dialectical thinking. Images spring from contradiction. To resolve the contradiction is to determine the images; such determination, however, is the incorporation of dialectical images into a theoretical edifice that cannot help but close off whatever explosive power the images themselves possess. (238-9)

Pensky correctly interprets Jennings’ discomfort with the subjectivity of Benjamin’s materialist historian as an insufficiently dialectical stance. The goal is not to dissolve the barbarism of culture through theorization, but to reframe the relation between the barbarous and the cultural—to refigure the relation between the two, but always in a provisional way. Pensky sees that this distinction occurs at the level of origin: the dialectical images themselves are produced out of the tension Jennings identifies above. Rather than destroy one’s own subjectivity—through the destruction of mythologization and narrativization that are at their base ideologies—Benjamin’s method, the seeking for and presentation of dialectical images, engages a serious mode of dialectical play that maintains the tension of oppositions by oscillating between them. As Jameson argues throughout The Political Unconscious, the task of the Marxist critic is not to resolve contradictions but to reveal them, and thereby to show that the “aesthetic act is itself ideological” because it points up symptomatically the collective desire to invent
“imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (64). The inverse of this pursuit of closure is a provisionality that does not determine meaning; instead, Benjamin’s method, holding on to a faith that an objective “truth” (of inherent social contradictions) will be discovered, offers “unresolvable,” tension-saturated images for the reader/viewer to experience.

If provisionality is one key descriptor for a Benjaminian model of reading, critical orientation is of equal importance. The materialist historian works against the predominant construction of (historical) narrative as a series of exclusions (in pursuit of dominant themes or causes), so that the foundation for Benjamin’s method is, in Pensky’s words,

a mode of receptivity for images that presupposes a particular attitude or disposition; a critical rejection of myth. This disposition is indispensable for the critic to be able to recognize that state of affairs in which, beyond the mythic veil of capitalist phantasmagoria, a concrete visual element of that which has been approaches the present in such a way that a “now,” fully charged with time, becomes representable. (219)

Pensky italicizes the key word here: receptivity. He identifies a certain orientation towards the material a Benjaminian critic encounters, one that rejects myth21 and thereby allows complex and multivalent images to emerge—the structures and ruptures of history ignored by officialized narratives. Once again, we can see this orientation, this receptivity to the detritus of the past, as a complicated politics of subjectivity. What this means is that a model based on Benjamin’s dialectical image is open to reading a text as

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21 The modernist engagement with myth—Eliot in The Waste Land, Pound in The Cantos, Joyce in Ulysses, and so on—looms over this exploration. In The Political Unconscious, especially 62-67, Jameson helps us to see, via Claude Levi-Strauss, that the desire for wholeness and completion in a fragmented capitalist modernity manifests in a seeking and a repurposing of totalizing myths (drawn from elsewhere), an act that is symptomatic of disillusionment and discomfort with class structure and social relations at the turn of the twentieth century. As I suggest above, from a slightly different angle, Benjamin’s method is an alternative poetics of contradiction and oscillation—one that maintains the tensions in the texts as a way to show the tensions underlying them (though of course this is never a perfectly-matched correspondence).
an historical object that fully reflects its milieu, to a reading that offers a juxtaposed image rather than a triumphalist story (a “myth”). We return, then, to the “crystal of the total event,” to a sense of incredulity to received narratives that nonetheless maintains a faith in the provisional meaningfulness of texts that do not resolve or rebalance contradictions. Benjamin’s dialectical image presupposes a truth to be found, so that fragments—wrenched from their original contexts and brought to light as an image by a receptive critic, and then taken in by an equally receptive reader/viewer—illuminate a totality. This is a short lived revelation of truth, a momentary lifting of the naturalized “veil” of ideology to reveal what Jameson calls the “subtext” of social contradictions (Political Unconscious 66), though it is no less valuable for its temporariness.

Benjamin’s method moves from a receptivity to anti-mythological images—an openness to text which reveals, piece by piece, a previously undisclosed “total event” hidden by the “capitalist phantasmagoria”—to a dialectical presentation of these discoveries as a montage that dramatizes his new conception of history, one that halts and staggers yet creates space to move inexorably towards a revolutionary future. In another undercutting of the self-identical subject, Benjamin claims in a lucid passage that

It is not that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather an image is that in which the Then [das Gewesene] and the Now [das Jetzt] come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. (qtd. in Richter 203 [trans. Richter])

Benjamin continues on the same page, “while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical—not

22 Eiland and McLachlan give an alternate translation:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. (Arcades Project 463)
development but image leaping forth” (Arcades Project 463). There is a sense here of both immediacy and chance, of the “flash of lightning”—seemingly beyond the control of the critic—that, in a mix of metaphors, “leap[s] forth.” This illuminated moment of tension at once reveals an “objective” history and unveils to the viewer/reader the constructedness of objectivity and subjectivity, of liberal-bourgeois “development.” The “image” Benjamin calls for here is dialectical in at least two ways: 1) it “constellates” the past and the present, a recontextualization of historical fragments that leads to an altered sense of the material conditions of the present; and 2) it simultaneously empowers and disempowers the modern subject, both the critic who juxtaposes the material and the reader/viewer who takes in the newly-created image—neither of whom fully control the objective “truth” that may or may not be revealed. If, after Peter Hitchcock, we take the dialectic to be an oscillating movement toward (though never achieving) full synthesis, there is a productive contradiction in the notion of “dialectics at a standstill.” When arrested in this way, the image is momentarily perceivable as a totality—but it must, like the cinematic reel, move again to another frozen, constellated image. Benjamin’s method calls for a carefully-constructed montage, a series of dialectical images that serially “flash” into view in a representation of non-narrative time. At every turn, Benjamin offers a method that resists instrumentalization and full resolution, and it is the dialectical oscillations—between subject and object, between historian and reader/viewer, between political investment and academic objectivity—that ensure its continual movement. And, again, this is a political move on Benjamin’s part, a way to unravel dominant ideological constructions and officialized narratives that are used (consciously and unconsciously) to justify oppressive social relationships. By design—and by roundabout metaphorization (flashes and leaps)—the dialectical image works against this sort of co-optation.

In Benjamin’s historiography, the dialectical image has explosive potential. But I am left in the present study with a lingering question: how is this a model for reading?
My reading of Benjamin’s autobiographical writing above—my claim that he enacts these ideas through the locus of his own memories—shows how the complex thinking through of the dialectical image can be a model for reading text, for registering the subtle historical contingencies of the text while simultaneously gaining an understanding of the contemporary scene of reading. Indeed, Benjamin’s more “literary” writing—particularly *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*—develops as a series of “frozen quasi-photographic image[s],” to use Gerhard Richter’s phrasing (39), that think *with* the past to give shape to an understanding of the present moment. Robert S. Lehman argues that Benjamin’s approach to time, as articulated in his study of German tragic drama, productively “petrifies” history (237)—challenging epic “grand narratives” of progress and constructing an at once crumbling and timeless ruin of the modern self out of the quotidian and the marginal. In his autobiographical work, Benjamin’s historical materials are his own everyday experiences; his self-writing lays bare the problematic and contradictory yet productive “objectivity” in his historiographical method. It is an open question whether the political “truths” a young Benjamin perceives as he wanders through the capital are material and objective, or whether he is merely a mouthpiece for the mature Benjamin’s Marxist-communist sympathies. Indeed, we have seen that a Benjaminian model for reading stands on the knife’s edge of the subjective and the objective, seeking after contradictions while never wavering in the political convictions that drive that very seeking after. Rather than a lens that one might apply to text—a critical operation wholly distasteful to Benjamin—the model becomes a sort of critical orientation that derives meaning from the text by moving dialectically through an always-already problematized self. In a sense, the central problematic of poststructuralism looms large here: we cannot trust that there is a metalanguage, that there is an outside to ideology from which to launch a fully-formed critique. Therein lies the power of Benjamin’s dialectical image; in its provisionality, in its movement, in its doubleness and contradiction, there is the ever-present possibility that something new will emerge. What this method looks like in practice is a bringing
together of textual fragments into a new constellation, with the hope that an ontological or political “truth” will be revealed at the interstice of past and present. Through dialectical readings, derived from Benjamin’s complex historiographical method, this project works to reframe the present through a reframing of the past and call into question, as Benjamin does, the foundations of received knowledge that structure our current ideological paradigms. As I will show in the next chapters, this approach examines and reveals the oscillations of subject/object and self/history that reverberate in Mansfield’s, Stein’s and (Riding) Jackson’s dialectical images of their represented selves—in the “I” of autobiography, in the projected critical identity in prose, and in the complex self-fashionings of fiction and poetry. A Benjaminian reading of these texts offers provisional sketches of the irreducibly contradictory social relations to which these writers responded and to which they were subject.

**Conclusion**

The problematics of subjectivity in Benjamin’s dialectical image—allegorized in the Angel of History, registered in his autobiographical writing, and theorized in “Konvolut N” of *The Arcades Project*—are ripe for further exploration. It is a task not without risks, risks that attend to any dialectical project. In an incomplete but aptly doubled description of his long-time friend’s “philosophy,” Adorno claims that Benjamin’s

> [...] target is not an allegedly over-inflated subjectivism but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself. Between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his philosophy, the subject evaporates. Before his Medusan glance, man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds. For this reason Benjamin’s philosophy is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness. (235)

In this configuration, Benjamin’s subject-who-remembers is temporarily emptied of meaning—petrified by a “Medusan glance.” What I would add to Adorno’s sense of temporary evacuation here is the notion that Benjamin’s autobiographical writing also
attempts to *represent* that complex subject-who-experiences, and what *results* is a
series of objective images of the complexities of the present moment. As Richter
reminds us in the epigraph to this chapter, Benjamin not only retreats but also
articulates the *form* of that retreat, staging the act of representing the subject. Adorno’s
description—that the subject serves as a “stage on which an objective process
unfolds”—comprises one part the complexity of Benjamin’s method, and of his self-
representation. The subjective dimension is not “target[ed]” in Benjamin’s dialectical
image, but it is invoked as part of his method. The critic—the child who experiences the
“unwrapping” and the artist who remembers and arranges the juxtaposition of images—
becomes an Angel of History, oscillating between melancholy and outrage but always
looking, always digging, and in that process he presents a version of himself. The “single
catastrophe” that Benjamin watches and laments has only one response, however
inadequate: continue to write, continue to represent those experiences which had
meaning in the moment, continue to dwell in the images of the present. For the
purposes of this study, Benjamin’s half-tragic response is the beginning of a model for
reading the past through texts that themselves read the past—a form, per Jameson, of a
“political unconscious” of modernism—a model that creates its own dialectical images,
images that call into question taken-for-granted (read: ideological) distinctions between
self and history, between agent and structure, indeed between subject and object. And
as I hope to show in the following chapters, it is in the modernist period that the
intensity of engagement with and expression of these problematics reaches its zenith—
a result of the (conscious and unconscious, intentional and structural) imbrication of
explosive material conditions, intense self-reflection, and tension-riddled dialectical
images, ever resistant to singular and “useful” meaningfulness.
Chapter 2.

“A Married Man’s Story” and “Je Ne Parle Pas Français”: A “Glimpse” of the Dialectic in Katherine Mansfield’s Politics of Self-Representation

With this brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.

-Walter Pater, “Conclusion” to The Renaissance 189

I needn’t say anything. Merely show.

-Benjamin, The Arcades Project 460

Katherine Mansfield was not a rebel, she was an innovator. Born into the English traditions of prose narrative, she neither turned against these nor broke with them—simply, she passed beyond them. And now tradition, extending, has followed her. Had she not written, written as she did, one form of art might be still in infancy.

-Elizabeth Bowen, “A Living Writer” 126

Katherine Mansfield’s late fiction can be read simultaneously as a political engagement with the complexities of modern subjectivity in post-WWI Europe and as an innovative form of self-portraiture. In the latter case, her place in the trajectory of aesthetic modernism has been secured among scholars: as Vincent O’Sullivan, and more recently, Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber, and J. Lawrence Mitchell, have argued, Mansfield’s innovative narrative techniques, especially via the short story, inaugurated a new breed of fiction ambiguously poised between psychological realism and post-modern
fragmentation. Regarding the former case—Mansfield’s politics—in this chapter I will argue that, by linking Mansfield’s technique to Walter Benjamin’s historiographic notion of the “dialectical image,” we can register the ways that this formal experimentation, set in dialectical tension with memory and self-fashioning, offers us a “glimpse” of the writer’s role in the politics of representation. Indeed, the aesthetic and the political come together in Mansfield’s work through her complex presentation of images. In addition to contextualizing the political in Mansfield scholarship more generally—a context lacking somewhat in nuance and detail—I will examine two understudied Mansfield texts, “A Married Man’s Story” and “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” as exemplars of the complexities of self-representation in the modernist period, of the political valences of narration and of self-representation, and of Mansfield’s innovative attempt to dramatize those complications through what she called the “glimpse.”

What Benjamin’s theoretical apparatus and critical language illuminate is the dialectical interface between memory (the singular/subjective past) and history (the collective/objective past) in Mansfield’s work—an oscillation that Mansfield presents in her fiction as a series of what she calls “glimpses” into the past, images that point up both the tension-filled intensity of language and its seeming unsuitability for capturing the fullness of lived experience. As I will explore below, these glimpses are most often read by critics as an emotional, feminine counterpart to the Joycean epiphany; I will suggest instead that Mansfield’s narrative ambiguities, cinematically presented as complexly-rendered images, are indeed epiphanic, but that they also point up a profoundly political engagement with the problem of ideological investment and identification. If we think about Mansfield’s narrators as Benjaminian Angels of History, these glimpses present the “catastrophe” of the self, the ways that investments in particular conceptions of gender, sexuality, class, race and age are simultaneously

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23 See O’Sullivan, “Introduction” to Mansfield’s New Zealand Stories 6-8; Kimber and Wilson, Celebrating Katherine Mansfield 2-3; Mitchell, Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism 4-6.
buttressed and undone by language—revealing the inadequacy (or even malevolence) of a bourgeois subjectivity that serves the status quo. As several of Mansfield’s later stories explore, this oscillation between identification and disavowal is especially problematic when one trades in, and when one’s trade’s in, words. Mansfield’s varied self-portraiture suggests that the construction of the image—that modernist tendency to turn to the visual register, to make the self an aesthetic object—serves as neither a balm nor an escape but as an intensification of the contradictions inherent in subjectivity.

Like Benjamin’s “I” in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Mansfield’s narrators become Angels of History in at least two ways: 1) in their fraught relation to Mansfield’s conception of her aesthetic technique, they stage the conflicted status of language as the route to representation, to both appearance and essence—and the continuously problematic role of the writer as both initiator and subject of that same initiation, as the onlooker who is able to identify the shape of the destructive debris progress leaves behind but cannot stop its accumulation; 2) as image machines, presenting “objectively” their simultaneously profound and mundane experiences, they offer a complicated and, I will argue, dialectical “cry against corruption,” not only as a symbol for emotional or psychological states but as a comment on the constructive and deconstructive possibilities of the visual register as such. How much can the image—in language—tell us? Even in the most natural and personal of narrative pursuits, we can find in Mansfield’s texts an engagement with and critique of the political structures of modernity—a rethinking of language, the very ground upon which the self-identical, “natural” bourgeois subject is both founded and foundered.
“at one and the same moment”: Dialectical Doll houses

One of the origins for my thinking about Katherine Mansfield’s late fiction is a dollhouse my sister inherited from a neighbour in the tiny logging town of Sayward, British Columbia, in the mid-1980s. A small child at the time, I recall jealously watching my sister set up her Barbies in various poses of domestic bliss within it—and I recall sneering at the lack of fit in the scene: the Barbies were too big for a doll house that already occupied a significant portion of my sister’s room. The dollhouse was large, but not large enough. Like bourgeois ideology itself, the edifice, the impressive construct, seemed to overpower its practical allowances, its range of lived possibility. In my memories, this sense of jealousy is set alongside an irrational fear of a house fire, and a devout nightly prayer to god that my toys, my books, and, finally, my family be saved from utter destruction if the downstairs woodstove were to explode in the night. Like my sister’s doll house, my profound pyrophobia was never more than childish fantasy. But that doesn’t make the fear I felt any less real; rather, the possibility that both my house and my sister’s doll house would burn down intensified the fear, perhaps because it denaturalized my own lived experience—made it seem out of place and combustible—and through these conjured images of destruction and ruin made it parallel to the surreal domestic strangeness of Barbie behemoths in that room-dominating wooden structure. I am tempted to see them as a domestic recasting of Ronald Reagan in the White House, or Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street: the ostensibly purifying fire of the economic tear-down, trickling down into domestic spaces, carried with it the refiguring of lived experience.

What this constellation of memory—and my articulation of it—begins to map is an inescapably dialectical relation to my own history: I cannot but conceive of and write my own memories through the lens of the present moment, and with the focus necessary to the task at hand. And the outcome is inevitably coloured by the simultaneity of these two moments. Thus, in a species of autobiography, I take an
imprecisely-remembered sense of my past experiences—mediated by pictures, by my sister’s memories, by an adult visit to Sayward many years later, and so on—and read it alongside the political and critical investments of my doctoral research project on history and subjectivity in modernist writing (not to mention my own left-leaning response to neoliberal policies of austerity in North America and the Eurozone in this current political moment). One could argue that I feel the lack of fit domestic bourgeois ideology and its inheritances have with my own life and I project that discomfort—combined, perhaps, with an unconscious desire to burn it all down—onto my less theoretically-informed six-year-old self. As I argue throughout this project, when this dialectical interplay is enacted on the page, when experimental modernist writers use the past to create ambiguous and politically-charged written selves, new possibilities for the present emerge. Indeed, I have found myself consistently baffled and inspired by the play of subjectivity in modernist writing, of the moments of highly-personal memory uncannily revealing deep political investments—and this bafflement and intrigue, I would suggest, is not coincidental.

To reframe this relation between what one might call personal investments and my project, between subject and object—to make this literary criticism, rather than simply a sort of critical autobiography—I want to examine a moment of productive ambiguity in Mansfield’s widely-anthologized “The Doll’s House.” The story is a poignant point of entry for the broader claims I am making in this dissertation, both for its allegorical potential (as productive imagery for my reading of Mansfield’s corpus) and
for its exemplariness (as a text in its own right). This moment or “glimpse” occurs on the story’s first page, as Kezia Burnell\(^\text{24}\) sees the eponymous doll’s house for the first time:

The hook at the side was stuck fast. Pat prised it open with his penknife, and the whole house-front swung back, and—there you were, gazing at one and the same moment into the drawing-room and dining-room, the kitchen and two bedrooms. That is the way for a house to open! Why don’t all houses open like that? How much more exciting than peering through the slit of a door into a mean little hall with a hatstand and two umbrellas! That is—isn’t it?—what you long to know about a house when you put your hand on the knocker. Perhaps it is the way God opens houses at dead of night when He is taking a quiet turn with an angel.

(258-9)

This remarkable passage opens a story engaged with the class politics of colonial New Zealand, a story where bourgeoisie parents are forced to have their children “mixed together” with working class children in “the only school for miles” (260). Mansfield offers a parable of social mobility. The most striking feature of the doll’s house is the “real” lamp in the dining-room, an object that Kezia “liked frightfully” (259). It is that same lamp that is “seen” by “our” Else Kelvey—the maid’s daughter dressed in the Burnell’s repurposed clothing—in the epiphanic moment at the close of the story (266). And Else’s culminating glimpse (“I seen it” [266]) carries a heavy burden of meaning, both for the characters and for the thematic resonance of the story. This in spite of (or

\(^{24}\) Like Paul Morel in D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* and Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, we can read Kezia Burnell—who recurs in a number of Mansfield’s *New Zealand Stories* and is the protagonist of Mansfield’s incomplete novel, *The Aloe*—as a fictionalized version of Mansfield herself. There are a number of productive correspondences we might observe between the young Mansfield here and the young Benjamin of *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, not least of which is the slip between the object (a represented past historical time and place) and the subject (a subjective self-representation), and the oscillating agency afforded the present scene of writing—as I explore below. Outside of the scope of the present study is a second implication of the Kezia/Mansfield nexus: Mansfield’s conception of herself as a “little colonial” in her dealings with dominant English culture, as represented by writers like Lawrence and Virginia Woolf (*Journal* 107-8). This “stranger—an alien” is a figure projected, at least in part, in “little” Kezia and her writer’s eye for the details of colonial New Zealand (*Journal* 108). For more on this complicated self-identity, see Gerri Kimber, Delia da Sousa Correa, and Janet Wilson’s recent collection, *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*. 

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perhaps because of) the fact that the Kelveys only get to glance into the doll’s house, before being chivvied away by Kezia’s “cold and proud” Aunt Beryl\textsuperscript{25} (265). Class functions in the story as a divisive force in the lives of the children—who simultaneously want the comforts of bourgeois bliss and fantasize about an outside to such structures—but class isn’t presented in economic terms; instead, “The Doll’s House” is a story of control and of seeing: this inaugurating image of the house “open[ing]” to reveal simultaneously all its rooms enacts the god-like oversight of narration and of class privilege. What Mansfield holds in tension here is the access and the permission, the “hand on the knocker,” that allows for that expanded perspective. Indeed, the story stages this class-based problem of access through Kezia’s desire to show the doll’s house to the Kelvey girls, only to have her request denied by her mother—who presumes that this prohibition is self-evidently justified (263). Other details in Mansfield’s image above are striking: the implication of violence in the “penknife”—wielded, significantly, by a working class “handyman”—that allows the girls access to the oversight; the pregnant pause before “there you were” that poignantly enacts the wonder of childhood; the dashed-off phrase—“isn’t it?”—that invokes an ineffability of experience and a need for an other to verify one’s own desire; the stark contrast of the “dead of night” with the “quiet turn,” revealing the doubled threat and comfort of a watchful god—a dangerous position not necessarily ameliorated by the “angel” that accompanies her.

Critics have tended to focus their reading of this story in one of two directions—seeing it either as a richly symbolic portrait of childhood wonderment or as an unsubtle editorialization about class injustice—and nearly all readers have tended to ignore its potential for a structural political critique, its politics of form. In a 1936 reassessment of

\textsuperscript{25} Beryl represents Mansfield’s quintessential young adult figure—what C.K. Stead describes as “the young woman on the brink of experience” (32)—poised between the freedoms and the responsibilities of adulthood. Throughout Mansfield’s New Zealand stories, Beryl is presented as a confused figure who is seeking romance and sex, avoiding marriage and motherhood, and struggling, as Miroslawa Kubasiewicz observes, to find an authentic self in this milieu (56-57).
Mansfield’s work, in particular her refinement of the genre of the short story, David Daiches follows the latter reading by describing the moment the housefront swings open as follows:

The thought at the end [regarding “what you long to know when you put your hand on the knocker”] is not a child’s thought; it is her own. From describing the working of a child’s imagination she has slipped almost imperceptibly into giving an example of the working of her own. We find this occasionally throughout the stories—the spectator becoming too interested to hold aloof and allowing her own consciousness to enter. It is just because [Mansfield’s] approach is usually so objective that we notice those occasions where, only for a moment, she allows the subjective element to enter. (36)

Just like my own “subjective” take on my childhood memories—the construction of myself as proto-Marxist—Daiches here undergirds his reading with an assumption of authorial interjection, that there is something too fine, too precise, too smart in this image for us to read it as a realistic portrayal of a child’s perceptions. Daiches focuses particularly on the ambiguity of the question—“isn’t it?”—as a moment of Mansfield slipping “imperceptibly” into another mode of discourse, to the story’s detriment. On this reading, Mansfield’s formal virtuosity, her ability to provoke via ambiguity a discomfort and desire for closure and meaning, seems to hold back her ability to engage with and think through broader intellectual questions, to remain a “spectator.” As Kate Fullbrook puts it, Mansfield “did not articulate her social critique of human suffering in recognizably political terms” (17). A plurality of readers see the symbolic element, the expressly non-realist portion of Mansfield’s work, as the most noteworthy aspect of this passage—and of the story as a whole. For example, Vincent O’Sullivan, in his influential essay “The Magnetic Chain,” reinforces and quotes an early review of the story that reads the lamp as an “emblem of ecstasy, paradise, the world’s desire” (108)—a sentiment not unlike Cherry Hankin’s in 1978: “It is as if the lamp, with its symbolic associations of vision and beauty, has given them [the Kelveys] a kind of imaginative protection against the harsh, outside world” (473). Andrew Gurr claims that the lamp is
a “central symbol” in the story that “represent[s] something fragile and transient, which may be no more than a momentary gleam but which is a central reason for existence” (79). Finally, Shifen Gong’s reading of Mansfield’s symbolic economy is perhaps the most nuanced. He argues that the lamp is the book-ending symbolic frame which exemplifies the typical beginnings of her stories, which leave unstated the kinds of background “explanation” of character, event, and setting that might be expected in conventional “cause-and-effect” narratives; and the typical endings of her stories, which refuse to offer explicit resolutions, allowing “significance” to be intuitively apprehended by readers. (228)

In Gong’s estimation, Else’s “simple statement about the lamp” functions as “so much more than a mere statement of fact” (228), though he does not elaborate on what that “more” might be.

While I am in agreement about the formal effect of this structure in Mansfield’s story, I would draw different conclusions from the ambiguity Gong sees at play in “The Doll’s House.” I would suggest that both aspects—the rich symbolism and the “imperceptible” socialism—make meaning simultaneously in this passage, and the dialectical oscillation between these qualities give the story an important and as-yet unacknowledged political resonance. This resonance can be registered in the tensions between materiality and abstraction in the passage: the material objects and complex notions of perception are placed—like the rooms of the doll’s house itself—shoulder to shoulder, the language staging a contradictory sense of time, where these objects are listed sequentially (in a narrative put to text) but are presented simultaneously as an allegorical image. As in much of Mansfield’s late fiction, there is a sense of ineffability. Kezia is unable to narrate this oscillation of objects and perceptions, except to describe it abstractly as a sort of simultaneity: “there you were, gazing at one and the same time.” Yet this indescribable experience constructs an ideal (and desirous) knowledge: “That is—isn’t it?—what you long to know about a house.” The way Kezia connects this knowledge to God’s “quiet turn” positions her own “gazing” at the “house-front” as
equivalent to “the way” an angel might see things—indeed, as a subject not unlike a Benjaminian Angel of History, overcome by witnessing the pileup of simultaneous past experiences. Mansfield presents the narrative “I” both as an overwhelmed child unable to process what she sees and as a mature subject in the scene of writing who is working to represent and understand that perception. I would argue, further, that both the objects and the abstractions belong to these two aspects simultaneously—so that there is an oscillation, detectable in the play of language, between child and adult, between narrator and writer, and between materiality and abstraction. So what Mansfield presents is a complex and intensely contradictory image of knowledge acquisition and perception that is also an unfolding of sequential thought and experience within Kezia’s consciousness and perception. Indeed, it’s not surprising that the doll’s house is “too much” for the Burnell children to handle (259).

What makes this passage political is precisely the way perception is “made new” by this oscillating glimpse of the doll’s house, and by extension Mansfield’s presentation of this image: readers are offered an allegory that presents the joy and the potential violence of a colonial class system, imbricated with a child’s overwhelmed wonderment—in a contradiction not easily reconciled. I would suggest that Mansfield’s aesthetic innovation here is the unresolved interplay she sets up between the (often ironized) “epiphanies” of her characters and the self-reflexive “glimpse” the writer experiences in the act of representing the interior lives of her characters. In this formulation, Kezia’s wonderment at the simultaneity of her “gazing” at the doll’s house is also Mansfield’s meditation on the difficulty and exhilaration of the attempt to capture the complexities of even the most mundane of moments. As Benjamin’s writing helps to illuminate below, Mansfield here (and elsewhere) is using formal experimentation as a new way to look at the ideological constructs that define, inspire, and control us, a visual strategy of seeing in multiple. Indeed, the material objects Mansfield juxtaposes (the hatstand, the dining-room lamp, the “pictures on the
walls”[259]) are not merely fine details that fill out a picture, in miniature, of colonial life; they are—“at one and the same moment”—pieces that compose (violently, if necessary) a new order of time and narration founded on contradiction and ambiguity, rather than on closure and finality. As Pat “prise[s]” open the “house-front,” readers are presented with a microcosm of the New Zealand bourgeoisie, a metaphor for the problematics of class relations in a colonial setting that modeled itself after England—a doll’s house imitation of the “real” thing—and they are offered this allegory as a static image that “prises open” conventional narrative strategies of methodical, realist textual representation. Like Kezia’s experience of the world, Mansfield presents the doll’s house (in its multiple registers) all at once, leaving the narrative “I” to look everywhere and nowhere and to experience the overwhelming sensation of a God-like yet fleeting knowledge of the total—only to have that oversight taken away as the narrative jumps to the next complex and contradictory image.

One might say that Daiches is right to see a subjective impetus behind this passage; it is, in short, an articulation of a provisional narrative perspectivalism that draws together, in complex and ambiguous ways, the past and the present, the material and the abstract, and the subjective and the objective. Mansfield’s approach is an innovation founded on a visual reimagining that works dialectically (but perhaps not consciously) to shake at what Benjamin sees as a major pillar of the ideological framework that informs colonial life, childhood, class relations, the writer’s life, and so on: progressive, cause-and-effect temporality. As we shall see in Mansfield’s attempts to articulate her craft, and in her representations of male writers in “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and “A Married Man’s Story,” neither attempts to integrate nor to break fully from received ideological structures—and the material conditions they both produce and reinforce—can succeed. Instead, like Benjamin’s archaeologist ever “churning” the ground, Mansfield and her varied personae can only stage the impossibility of the act of resolving and breaking, can only oscillate between desiring closure and fearing its
constrictions. In doing so, Mansfield is able to put on display both her talent for ambiguous self-representation and the material reality of the past’s inevitable scarring of the present—a scarring only visible in that act of representation.

The Glimpse and/as the Dialectical Image: the Epiphanic Forms of Mansfield’s Politics

Mansfield’s politics have been unevenly explored in past and recent scholarship, particularly the political implications of her formal innovations. “The Political Katherine Mansfield,” Lee Garver’s perceptive 2001 article in Modernism/Modernity, is the only study at-length of Mansfield’s engagement with the complex and fraught political landscape in which she wrote. Garver focuses on In a German Pension, and on Mansfield’s participation in a guild socialism that critiqued nationalism and jingoism and rejected state-based solutions to social inequalities (especially fixes based on eugenics and social purity). However, a broader analysis of Mansfield’s politics of form, especially as they played out in her later fiction, has yet to be pursued. In the present study, I begin to fill that gap by examining the implications of Mansfield’s formal experimentation with narrative voice, self-portraiture, and visuality. Indeed, as I explore above, it is in the politics of form that one can register the sort of critique pursued in a story like “The Doll’s House”—which addresses, in a surface way, class politics in colonial New Zealand but also jostles with the foundations of entrenched and ideological assumption. More significant, then, are the ways in which Mansfield’s narrative innovations refigure time and memory, and in doing so, take a stance against the inexorable march of progress: the ways rational, cause-and-effect, indeed patriarchal understandings of the social fabric reinforce and solidify exploitatively hierarchical structures—especially gender—and further, the ways perception and expression of this worldview, this ideology, are inscribed in our very language. So, just as Mansfield’s technique folds into her aesthetic intentions—reinforcing the thematics of seeing anew
that are laced through her stories—so too does the structure of her narrative presentation offer a glimpse into her political investments in socialism, materialism, feminism, and even a nascent Marxism.

My reframing of the political here as a question of structure and form derives from Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image,” which gives us a language with which to articulate Mansfield’s politics of form, a connection made most plain when we examine Mansfield’s term for ineffable experience, the “glimpse.” As I outline in the previous chapter, Benjamin’s late Marxist criticism focuses on cultural detritus from the past, as an orientation that works to critique the dominant (and dominating) narratives of his contemporary moment. His method—combining disparate fragments into a juxtaposed and tension-riddled whole—seeks to produce a series or montage of dialectical images. The effect of this technique, as Benjamin imagined it, was to uncouple history from a triumphalist narrative of the victors—and from the “empty, homogenous time” which both contained and supported that narrative. Benjamin’s materialist history, conversely, proposed a more complex and interwoven—indeed, dialectical—history that comes to the fore and is made legible via the ambiguously “objective” technique of the “dialectical image.” And, as I point out in Chapter 1, there are a number of unresolved (yet potentially productive) contradictions in Benjamin’s method, not least of which is a problematizing of the subjectivity of the writer collating and presenting these images. Benjamin’s “dialectical image” can function as a critical concept that holds ambiguities in tension, turning them productively towards a deconstruction of the received histories that the writing subject simultaneously identifies with and rejects. In this way, we can begin to identify the political resonances of Mansfield’s narrative innovations.
This comparison between Mansfield’s and Benjamin’s politics of form—and the dialectics it enacts—can most fruitfully be developed through an examination of what Mansfield called “glimpses,” attempts to represent a epiphanic moment, parallel to (but not necessarily coterminous with) other modernist attempts in the same vein: Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being”; James Joyce’s “epiphanies”; Marcel Proust’s “mémoire involontaire”; and so on. Mansfield never explicitly articulated a political frame for what has been read as an aesthetic category or technique but if we place her description of “glimpses” alongside some of her other critical writing and letters, we can begin to see two trajectories for her late fiction (what she calls her “two ‘kick-offs,’” as I explore below), an ambiguity that aligns her writing with Benjamin’s historiographic work. In a journal entry from 1920, Mansfield gropes for the words to describe a moment of vision:

And yet one has these “glimpses,” before which all that one ever has written (what has one written?)—all (yes, all) that one ever has read, pales .... The waves, as I drove home this afternoon, and the high foam, how it was suspended in the air before it fell.... What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment (what do I mean?) the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up—out of life—one is ‘held,’ and then—down, bright, broken, glittering on to the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow. (Journal 148)

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26 There is a broader context of modernist scholarship on the “epiphany” that lies beyond my purview, here. Influential studies on the subject include M.H. Abrams Natural Supernaturalism (1971), Morris Beja’s Epiphany and the modern novel (1971), and Ashton Nichols’ The poetics of epiphany: nineteenth-century origins of modern literary moment (1987). More recent studies of epiphanic moments in the first decades of the twentieth century, including Liesl Olson’s Modernism and the Ordinary (2009) and Sharon Kim’s Literary Epiphany in the Novel, 1850-950: Constellations of the Soul (2012), attest to the epiphany’s longevity as a critical concept for understanding the modernists’ innovative engagements with temporality, spirituality, and revelation. Beginning with James Joyce’s invocation of the term in Stephen Hero, to which I turn below, Beja defines an epiphany as “a sudden spiritual ‘manifestation’—a showing forth, an illumination, a revelation,” and according to Beja there are two types: the “retrospective epiphany” and “that of ‘the past recaptured’” (15). More recent critics have focused less on the temporal aspect of the epiphany, turning their attention instead to its ontological implications (see esp. Olson 4-9). Throughout this chapter, in order to distinguish Mansfield’s “glimpse” from comparable (but not identical) epiphanies in the work of her contemporaries, I refer in general to these “manifestations” as epiphanic moments.
There is violence and power in Mansfield’s image of the waves, but that power becomes revelation (“the whole life of the soul”) in the moment. There is something of a cinematic freeze-frame, a unit in a Benjaminian montage, in the “timelessness” of that “moment of suspension.” Mansfield withholds explanation—though she seems to desire it (“what do I mean?”)—but nonetheless ascribes totality to the vision achieved, where somehow “the whole of life is contained.” In order to reach this total sort of cognition, however, one must be “flung up—out of life” and then “tossed back” down. Like Benjamin’s dialectical image, then, Mansfield’s “glimpse” turns on both movement and stasis: her “glimpse” invokes a movement up towards understanding, caught out in a deeply meaningful moment, then violently returned to the wreckage, leaving the viewer senseless. As I will explore below, the oscillating form of the glimpse carries with it important political consequences because of the ways it problematizes received representational and narrative strategies, and the ways it wrests away control and repurposes inherited aesthetic constraints. And, through Benjamin, we can begin to see that these politics of form illuminate the ways that Mansfield’s innovations both depart from and align themselves with her modernist contemporaries.

We can see an oscillation between meaningfulness and the inadequacy of meaning (a movement shot through with shock and violence) as one of the most prominent features of Mansfield’s late fiction—and as an important site for Mansfield’s exploration of modernist aesthetics. We can think of Mansfield’s “glimpse” as a version of the modernist epiphany—a “sudden spiritual manifestation” (Joyce, Stephen Hero 211), but one that take form as an image in Mansfield’s texts, rather than manifesting “in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable state of mind,” as James Joyce’s protagonist describes it in Stephen Hero (211). When Joyce further articulates, through Stephen’s pedantic lectures, what he means by an epiphany, the notion does takes on an imagistic tone:

Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is
reached the object is epiphanised. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty. (211)

Although Stephen’s interlocutor, Cranly, responds with an absent-minded “Yes?” the presumed objectivity of the process—“focus[ed]” through an attuned “spiritual eye”—points to a possible distinction between Joyce’s epiphanies27 (as Stephen defines it, at least) and Mansfield’s “glimpses”: the role of the experiencing subject. Where Stephen’s “glimpses” are seemingly objective, the outcome of the “gropings” of the subject “adjust[ed]” to “an exact focus,” Mansfield’s “glimpses” seem to begin in subjective experience and tend not to move fully outside of the complications of self-representation. She presents them as moments of suspension in images that are distinct from and narrated by the self-reflecting viewing subject as s/he views it and as a staging of her own “groping” for those images.28 The correspondences between Joyce’s “epiphany” and Mansfield’s “glimpse” interest me more, however: in its pursuit of a “moment of focus,” of “epiphanis[ing]” the object as a way to illuminate the self, Mansfield’s “glimpse” is akin not only to Joyce’s epiphany, but also to Woolf’s “moments of being,” Pound’s “luminous details,” even Eliot’s “objective correlative.” A recent essay from Lacanian Josiane Paccaud-Huguet connects Mansfield’s epiphanic moments to D.H. Lawrence and to Woolf, pointing to “borderline experiences of fragmentation” that were opened up by a complex “economy of the voice” in modernist

27 It is an open question whether we are to take Stephen Dedalus, the fictionalized and ironized narrator Joyce constructs in *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*, at his word in this passage. As Liesl Olson observes: “Though the concept of the epiphany is introduced in *Stephen Hero*, it is also already renounced in favor of more materialist moments” (43). Olson goes on to suggest that the failed villanelle Stephen attempts to compose in *Portrait* calls into question the validity of any moment or object one might try to “epiphanise” (43-45). That said, the specific ambivalences of Joyce’s texts, and of his concept of the epiphany, are of less concern to me here than is the position of the concept itself in the pantheon of aesthetic modernism. I am pointing to Mansfield’s glimpse, and Benjamin’s dialectical image, as forms both equivalent to and productively different from Joyce’s “epiphany” (and Woolf’s “moments of being”).

28 We can draw a contrast here between the presumed subjectiveness of Mansfield’s “glimpse” with T.S. Eliot’s “filament” (his image of depersonalized poet as the “catalyst” that ostensibly is refined out through the alchemy of the poem). I will turn to the oscillations of objectivity and subjectivity in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in the Conclusion to the present project.
writing (132). As I show below with Mansfield’s connections to Woolf, in her complex enactment of the epiphanic moment, Mansfield both distinguishes her aesthetic—in its construction of an oscillating narrative voice and in its self-reflexive engagement with the surfaces of writing—and stakes her territory amidst modernist innovations—especially in the varied tensions between the subjective and objective register, multiplied by language and image.

Mansfield’s political critiques and innovative rearticulations are most acute when she offers up self-doubting yet absurdly arrogant male writers as protagonists, as she does in “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and “A Married Man’s Story.” “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” is narrated by Raoul Duquette, an effete Parisian writer sitting in a café. While sneering at the customers and servers, Raoul recalls an encounter with an Englishman and aspiring writer named Dick and with Dick’s fiancée, Mouse. After striking up a torrid friendship with Raoul—begun in the non-descript coffee shop that is the site of Raoul’s musings and writing about his experiences—Dick abruptly returns to England, leaving Raoul feeling “a little sick” (90). In this sickness, and in his suggestion that Dick “made the first advances” (85), Raoul reveals his homosocial desire, and the hints of an unrequited romance, that undercut the forceful masculine presence he presumes to project in his writing. This emasculation is reinforced when Dick announces his return to Paris a few months later, bringing along his newly-acquired fiancée, Mouse, whom Raoul describes as “exquisite, but so fragile and fine that each time I looked at her it was as if for the first time” (98-9). This fascination with her vulnerability culminates in an anti-climactic moment when a giddy Raoul, after setting the couple up for the night in a hotel suite, gets his hands on a letter from Dick that releases Mouse from their engagement—a breakup triggered by Dick’s mother’s disapproval of the match. The recollected story ends with Raoul offering help to Mouse without following through on the offer. He recalls with a small measure of sheepishness his cruel pleasure in witnessing and in retelling Mouse’s helplessness—especially her pathos-laden
declaration that she cannot speak French. Raoul frames his story by meditating on the power and control afforded by opportunity, although characteristically, he has difficulty finding a way to describe the “hour of the day” when that opportunity presents itself:

Do you believe that every place has its hour of the day when it really does come alive? That’s not exactly what I mean. It’s more like this. There does seem to be a moment when you realize that, quite by accident, you happen to have come on to the stage at exactly the moment you were expected. Everything is arranged for you—waiting for you. Ah, master of the situation! You fill with important breath. And at the same time you smile, secretly, slyly, because Life seems to be opposed to granting you these entrances, seems indeed to be engaged in snatching them from you and making them impossible, keeping you in the wings until it is too late, in fact [...]. Just for once you’ve beaten the old hag. (73)

Raoul confides that he “enjoyed one of these moments the first time [he] ever came in here” (73-4). His recollection is catalyzed by reading that “stupid stale little phrase” jotted down in green ink in his notebook (76): “Je ne parle pas Français.” When it is translated into writing, Mouse’s declaration of inadequacy becomes for Raoul a moment of empowerment. As she does in “A Married Man’s Story,” to which I will turn below, Mansfield constructs the narration around negation and its opposites—in this case Raoul identifying lacunae and then making a half-attempt to fill them—so that he becomes “master of the situation” only by chance, an opportunity presented in passive voice: “the moment you were expected”; “Everything is arranged for you.” Raoul attempts to present himself as a forthright agent in his own life, but his articulations of that agency betray a lack of direct participation on his part. In the same way, Raoul’s declaration of friendship and support in Mouse’s moment of abandonment amounts to nothing more than “acting,” since he “never went near the place again” (112). There is a measure of both joy in his witnessing of Dick and Mouse’s break-up and pleasure in his inaction—the frisson of unpunished social transgression, remembered fondly but abstractly. What is revealed in his simultaneous knowledge and stasis is the power, if tenuous, afforded the male writer: the control both over a fragile woman’s fate, and over his presentation of his and her part in the narrative.
In the uncertain and dangerous fate of Mouse, and in Raoul’s promise of action and subsequent inaction, Mansfield implies a moral failing inherent to the self-important writer—a moral failing wrought by obsessiveness and self-deceit, by over-abstraction and a disconnection from the people in his milieu. In this configuration, the only way to “[beat] the old hag”—“Life”—is to divest from it, to aestheticize the suffering of others and one’s part in that suffering. Indeed, it is only in the act of reading “Je ne parle pas Français” in his notebook months later that Raoul seems to feel something genuine:

There! It had come—the moment—the geste! And although I was so ready, it caught me, it tumbled me over; I was simply overwhelmed. And the physical feeling was so curious, so particular. It was as if all of me, except my head and arms, all of me that was under the table, had simply dissolved, melted, turned into water. Just my head remained and two sticks of arms pressing on to the table. But, ah! the agony of the moment! How can I describe it? I didn’t think of anything. I didn’t even cry out to myself. Just for one moment I was not. I was Agony, Agony, Agony. (76)

The complexity and multifariousness of this image, the way it is both undercut and buttressed by the narrator’s status as self-reflexive writer (“How can I describe it?”), makes this “moment” a Mansfieldian “glimpse” par excellence. What Raoul describes is nearly identical to Mansfield’s articulation of how “[o]ne is flung up—out of life—one is ‘held,’ and then, down, bright, broken, glittering on to the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow.” However, the intensity of Raoul’s reaction is heavily ironized and seemingly inauthentic, since it is his own notes—quoting someone else’s words—that instigate this “moment,” an experience whose effect he can only describe in melodramatic utterances (“But, ah!”; “Agony, Agony, Agony”) or through negation (“I didn’t think of anything”; “for one moment I was not”). Even in his cruel enactment of promise and inaction, leaving Mouse helpless and without language to defend herself, Raoul imagines himself to be “master of the situation,” violently “dissolved” down to nothingness before being returned in the moment of recollected writing to the regret and the ecstasy of his (in)actions.
In Raoul’s “spiritual groping”—to use Stephen Dedalus’ phrase—for the right way to describe his epiphanic experience, Mansfield is able to project an ambiguous image of the simultaneous hypocrisy and pathos of (especially male) self-representation: language is inadequate to represent and to absolve our selves and our actions, yet it is all we have. Neither the Self nor the Other can be made an independent object of scrutiny, but that does not stop Raoul—and by proxy, Mansfield—from trying to catch a glimpse, not only of the epiphanic moment but of the act of writing that moment. Indeed, Raoul’s exploration is made more complex and contradictory by Mansfield’s status as female writer critiquing the structures of male authorial power. As I explore below, Mansfield’s aesthetic project can be read as a feminine repurposing of the isolating “waste land” posited by canonical male modernists—repositioning Mansfield’s explorations of the “epiphany,” of the stereoscopic narrative voice, of complex symbolic patterning, and so on as a gendered critique of masculine aesthetic inheritances and of ideologies that maintain hierarchies of power. We can also recognize these techniques as part of an object lesson on where and how these legacies fail their seemingly empowered recipients. Following Kaplan and Miroslawa Kubasiewicz, I would argue that the gendered power plays attempted by Raoul here—and by Gregory Powder in “A Married Man’s Story”—combined with an overwrought aesthetic self-reflection, amount to Mansfield’s subtle commentary on the nature of male access to and enactment of power over words, representations, and the feminine—a commentary brought forward in the oscillations of oppositions contained, as Benjamin shows, in the complex images presented.

In addition to its convergence with (in technique) and departure from (in target and outcome) a patriarchal modernist aesthetic, Mansfield’s glimpse, in its various guises—Kezia’s doll house, the image of crashing waves, Raoul’s “geste”—also corresponds with and offers a rejoinder to what Virginia Woolf called “moments of being.” An examination of Woolf’s comments on her techniques of self-representation
helps to highlight the less-heralded innovations produced in Mansfield’s “glimpses.”

Mansfield’s conception of aesthetic perception, several years before Woolf’s most developed work (starting with Mrs Dalloway in 1925), may have exerted, as Ann Banfield has suggested, a direct influence over Woolf’s mature techniques of self-representation (486-8)—in particular, the capturing of immediate impressions. Banfield’s suggestion opposes the received understanding of Woolf’s and Mansfield’s relationship, which conventionally has been constructed as one of alternating rivalry and friendship—with Woolf’s position in the canon unyieldingly maintained above Mansfield’s. I am not pursuing a reordering, here, however: a deeper examination of this relationship, and of the canonical implications of suggesting, for example, that Mansfield’s contributions to a feminine stream-of-consciousness may outstrip and prefigure those of Woolf are beyond the scope of the present study.  

What I am interested in here is the mutual project of feminine self-representation and its dialectical relation to the “objective” structures of bourgeois ideology. Both Woolf and Mansfield, though approaching the problem from different perspectives, came to see this as the central problem to be solved by experiments in narrative representation—“moments of being” for Woolf, “glimpses” for Mansfield. Banfield also claims that Woolf’s complex structuring of novels like To the Lighthouse keeps “unobserved objects” and landscapes confined to “interludes—apart from the stories” (508); as a result, “Woolf’s formal aesthetic draws out of Mansfield’s innovations a philosophical import at once structural and thematic” (507). In other words, Woolf’s critical

29 Angela Smith, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two offers the most thorough examination to date of the personal and aesthetic relationship between Mansfield and Woolf, though it does not exhaust the comparison. Smith is primarily concerned with the correspondences between the two writers: their biographical similarities, their shared project of feminine writing (as distinct from their male contemporaries), their mutual subject position as “edgewomen,” and their shared formal strategies (especially multi-perspectivalism and techniques of psychological realism). As I will address below, the more recent essay from Banfield, “Time Passes,” analyzes Mansfield’s influence on Woolf’s literary Impressionism, and it focuses on Woolf’s attempt to expand and legitimize Mansfield’s sensory experiences as part of a theory of the novel. Banfield suggests that Woolf attempts to find a “solution” to limitations of the “raw material” of directly represented experience: “to place the moment within a theory of time” (490).
articulation of her own work helps to illuminate the significance of Mansfield’s less-clearly delineated aesthetic strategies. In my examination here, a Benjaminian reading of Mansfield serves a similar purpose—to draw out Mansfield’s political “import”—but I work to reframe Banfield’s priorities: Mansfield’s own self-reflection, and the complex and parodic self-reflections of her writerly characters, articulate their own significance—in the oscillations between self-representation and political commentary, held together inside the glimpse.

Indeed, though an in-depth comparison is beyond the scope of the present study, a cursory examination of the complications of the “glimpse” as compared to the Woolfian epiphanic moment begins to highlight the centrality of Mansfield’s innovations to the dominant narratives of modernist aesthetics. Further, it clarifies the productive role that tension and ambiguity—rendered as images in the Benjaminian sense—play in Mansfield’s work. First, I would argue that on the surface, Woolf seems to have a somewhat more detached or objective take on memory and representation than does Mansfield. For example, the pursuit of temporal expansion, implied in the “moment of suspension” that Mansfield breathlessly describes in her journal, carries with it certain assumptions about the basis for experience—most obviously, a sense of conscious, unfiltered and immediate responsiveness to experience. It is this connection to experience that Raoul seeks and ultimately fails to find and represent in “Je Ne Parle Pas Français.” Mansfield’s devotion to the work of Walter Pater, an important figure for British impressionists, fits in here, particularly his injunction in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*: “[O]ur one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (190).

Woolf’s “moments of being” seem to move towards a similar end, to take that same “chance,” but in doing so they begin to move towards a “theorization” of experience and its representation. Indeed, in something of an indirect response to Pater’s imperative (here and in my epigraph above), Woolf’s statements on writing posit
a reality that becomes momentarily discernible—for the reader and for the writer—in the articulation of heightened experience. Woolf most famously articulated in “A Sketch of the Past” what she saw as the “pattern” revealed in these moments of intense feeling. The memoir begins by articulating three early memories, what Woolf calls “exceptional moments” (71) in which she experienced “rapture rather than ecstasy” (66)—a stark contrast with the more common moments of “non-being” that characterize our experience of being “embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (70). Woolf explains,

It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (72)

What Woolf conveys here is similar to Mansfield’s description of her “glimpses” in that both writers invoke a moment of (psychological or spiritual) violence, a “shock,” as a catalyst for a realization or vision that stands out, a momentary experience that draws out a connection you had not seen. Woolf, again in contrast to Stephen Dedalus above, also articulates a writerly seeking after that representation—so that the epiphanic moment also happens in writing as much as in experience or in some external object. Self-representation mediates the exchange between subject and object—but what is revealed through art is an objective truth: that “we are connected with” the “pattern,” that “the whole world is a work of art.” The key image and idea, for our purposes, is the notion that “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern,” an assertion that reveals what Woolf’s “moments of being” are meant to show: the underlying structures of experience. As with Mansfield, there is a provisionality to this proposition, since as Woolf argues in “Modern Fiction,”
Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (160-1)

There is a measure of the impossible in this “task,” as Woolf acknowledges when she points to one’s “myriad impressions” on an “ordinary day” that are rather like “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (160). How does one go about putting this asymmetry of experience to text? One possible answer is indirect: Woolf posits an equivalence between those rapturous moments of being and the pattern of that “unknown and uncircumscribed spirit”—that those underlying, hard-to-fathom structures become momentarily recognizable in what she calls later in “Modern Fiction” “the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain” (161). In a sense, Woolf is proposing the revelation of an exterior structure through the careful and provisional representation of our innermost interiority. This paradox is what Banfield calls the “crystallization of the moment” (490), and what prompts Olson to suggest that Woolf “transforms, but does not reject, the literary realism of the past” (Olson 66). I submit that this focus on the “pattern” constitutes Woolf’s primary difference from Mansfield; the central node for Woolf—the role of memory, of those “exceptional moments” that pull away the “cotton wool”—tends to detach the image presented from the direct experience being represented. Moreover, Mansfield’s tendency to foreground the scene of writing, the way her stories themselves theorize the problems of representation Woolf addresses in her essays, highlights the difficulty of effectively capturing a depth or an objectivity in language. The relative (theoretical) solidity of Woolf’s narrative voices—their basis in an articulated aesthetic—grounds them against the violence of those epiphanic moments in a way that Mansfield’s “glimpses” cannot.
We can begin to see this subtle contrast at work in *Mrs Dalloway* when we examine one of Clarissa’s ostensible “moments of being” retold by a secondary character, Peter Walsh. Immediately following the moment when Dr. Holmes declares Septimus Smith dead—the death that gives rise to Clarissa’s famous epiphanic moment where she finds “pleasure” in being “lost [...] in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank” (157)—we are given the perceptions of Peter Walsh (returned from India to arrange a divorce with his wife) as he watches the ambulance speed away. Impressed with its “efficiency” and with “the communal spirit of London,” Peter recalls “those days” thirty years earlier when “Clarissa had a theory” on the “top of an omnibus” (129). Peter recalls,

they had heaps of theories, always theories, as young people have. It was to explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known. For how could they know each other? You met every day; then not for six months, or years. It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not ‘here, here, here’; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her skepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps—perhaps. (129-130).

This rich passage points up a number of prominent problematics within *Mrs Dalloway* worthy of further pursuit—the cascading structure of semi-colons subtly modifying the argument Peter summarizes, the spatialization (the “spread[ing] wide”) of the unrepresentable or unknowable, the deep irony of this meditation on the connectivity of life that is catalyzed by a moment of profound disconnection and death. However, I
want to focus on the small moment of concrete imagery, the moment when Clarissa “tapped the back of the seat.” Here, Woolf’s stream of consciousness narration moves through Peter Walsh’s memories to a recollected moment of expanded experience—observing Clarissa punctuate her theorizing with an emphatic gesture—that serves to reinforce the “theory” Woolf (qua Peter Walsh qua Clarissa) presents as an extant possibility, as an articulation of a “pattern” worth considering in spite of its “transcendental” ambitiousness: that our common humanity connects us, even unto death. That said, it is a “pattern” Woolf presents to us in the negative (“not ‘here, here, here’”), in an ambiguously structured, multi-vocal text, and in this way calls into question the veracity of Clarissa’s “theory.” And it contrasts with Clarissa’s own epiphanic moment catalyzed by Septimus’ death, where she sees the “process of living,” those “moments of un-being,” as the source of pleasure and delight. Peter’s “perhaps” allows for the possibility of sort of human connectivity Clarissa invokes in her younger years, and unlike Raoul—and as we will see below, Gregory Powder in “A Married Man’s Story”—Woolf’s quietly menacing masculine narrative perspective, in the person of Peter Walsh, imagines no disconnect between his recollection and its accuracy and reliability as memory. Put simply, Peter Walsh is not a writer—and even Septimus’ experience has less to do with the unreliability of (self)representation than with the

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30 Of course, Peter imagines himself to have a “look of having reserves. It was this that made him attractive to women, who liked the sense that he was not altogether manly” (132). But it seems clear that Peter’s pocket-knife, which he constantly holds in his hand as he travels through London, is a stand-in for an underlying menace—or at the least an inherent violence in the self-deluded airs he puts on for the Bloomsbury bourgeoisie. Peter’s central concern with the projection (and deciphering) of social image, with its concomitant destructiveness, comes to the fore in his own ostensible epiphanic moment when he decides to attend Clarissa’s party (in order to ask Mr Dalloway about colonial politics) and realizes that “mere gossip” fuels the soul:

For this is the truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves; that is, has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping. (136)
dangerous variety of perception\textsuperscript{31}—so that the layers of text we encounter in \textit{Mrs Dalloway} seem much more the “buffered” perceptions of Woolf herself, a novelist in full control of her expression and aware of her philosophy.

In a subtle contrast, in both its yoking of violence with provisionality, Mansfield’s “glimpse” is something more like a \textit{moment of (un)knowing} than of being. Full understanding is both projected and undercut in both directions by Mansfield’s images—in their ostensible objectivity and in their incomplete subjectivity—both more extreme and less resolved versions of Woolf’s “pattern behind the wool” that seems to project a seemingly stable, “patterned” relation between the subject and the world s/he encounters. On Mansfield’s response to Pater’s decadent aesthetics, Vincent O’Sullivan puts it this way, pointing to a less solid metaphor—the “flicker”—as the basis for Mansfield’s “intuition”:

To catch that flicker [what Pater calls “that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves”], to suggest the texture of that web, rather than to lay down lines which are meant to define or depict life in any larger way, was what Mansfield primarily sought in her own prose. Her own indirection, shifts of perspective, overlapping of minds, modulations of time, careful imprecisions of mood, the painstaking randomness of her

\textsuperscript{31} This danger of an expanded and too-fine perspective comes to a head just before Septimus falls to his death, when his companion Rezia brings him his papers for the last time:

She brought him his papers, the things he had written, things she had written for him. She tumbled them out on to the sofa. They looked at them together. Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings—were they?—on their backs; circles traced round shillings and sixpences—the suns and stars; zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks; sea pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves: the map of the world. Burn them! He cried. (125)

More work could be done to examine Septimus’ relation to Mansfield’s male writers—who also experience this sort of embodied agitation when they reread their own work—but at this juncture I want to observe Septimus’ “were they?” that calls into question the representational accuracy of the scribbles on his papers. Woolf presents Septimus’ point of view as one in a state of feeling as if “[h]is body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left,” as he describes it when he perceives a “Skye terrier […] turning into a man” (58). His expressed desire to “Burn them!”—perhaps referring to both the doctors controlling him and his own words—functions as a destructive culmination of the novel’s journey through Septimus’ swirling perceptions that are seemingly impossible for him to put to text.
best writing [...]—these are her attempt to fix the ‘single sharp impression’ against a background which denies both singleness and sharpness. (“Magnetic Chain” 111-112)

In connection with Woolf, I want to highlight what O'Sullivan calls Mansfield’s “[p]ainstaking randomness”—the sense of unresolved ambivalence in his phrase: her “best writing” appears to have no “pattern,” but it achieves its effect through an obsessive exploration of self-representation through images. Where Woolf, for example, might seek depth, that “pattern hid behind the cotton wool” (“Sketch” 73), Mansfield tends to seek surfaces, a “texture” upon an unfocused “background.” As Conrad Aiken says in an early review, Mansfield was “ecstatically aware of the surface of things” (357). As such, Raoul’s ironized epiphanic moment in “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” is not activated by a physical act of “tapping” leading out to a “transcendental theory” but by an encounter with language acting metaphorically yet viscerally on Raoul’s body. Moreover, Mansfield’s image is not insistently repetitious (“here, here, here”) but motionless and “turned into water,” not “giv[ing] scale” to one’s “intuition” but “expanding that interval” of experience through visceral, foregrounded imagery—even when, in both cases, the realization the character comes to amounts to little more than a philosophical truism.

This distinction I am making between Woolf and Mansfield here is not so stark, of course: through the problematic narrators who experience them, both of the epiphanic moments I’m examining cursorily here call out the simultaneous violence and insidiousness of patriarchal control. It is the movement of form towards which I want to direct our attention—in an analysis that colours the political critique we might register in Woolf’s and Mansfield’s respective narrative style. The distinction becomes easier to identify if we look at the way Mansfield invokes impressionism as the frame for her imagistic technique. In her reaction to a Dorothy Brett painting, for example, she celebrates “the sudden arrest, poise, moment, captured in the figure in a flowing shade a sunlight world” (“Letter to Dorothy Brett” 234). Mansfield [celebrates] the “moment,
captured”—but in this case the “sudden arrest” is presented as a “shade[d]” image, one that shimmers in “a sunlight world” but does not seem to represent that broader reality. The “poise” of the writer—which again seems to be a moment fraught with an overflow of sensation (“at one and the same time”)—lingers over the ecstatic surface of things; it does not plumb the depths of Woolf’s “pattern.” And while Pater’s “pulsations” can be read as an expansion of the direct moment of experience, I suggest that Mansfield’s focus—the “moment captured”—is on the memory and subsequent representation of “that interval,” which is already expanded. In other words, the “moment of suspension,” the expansion of “that interval,” happens both in art and in experience: it is Mansfield’s “glimpse”—perhaps even more so than Woolf’s “moments of being”—that paradoxically attempts to represent the “sudden arrest” (time) through a writerly expansion of surface rather than depth (space). We can think of this technique as a variation on Benjamin’s critical “barge pole,” attempting to “brush against the grain,” to re-present an image of the past in a momentarily frozen moment of text.

In her meditation on waves, and in her response to impressionist art, Mansfield was participating in a conversation about the relation between art and experience, and between the aesthetic object and the subject who contemplates it. Like Woolf, Mansfield wonders whether one should strive for the “pulsations,” or trust in the pattern muffled by wool but revealed at those moments where one is “held” (we might ask: held by whom or what?). In a review of Woolf’s “Kew Gardens,” Mansfield elaborates on her position, sounding quite Woolfian, but again with a notable adjustment in tone:

It happens so often—or so seldom—in life, as we move among the trees, up and down the known and unknown paths, across the lawns and into the shade and out again, that something—for no reason that we can discover—gives us pause. Why is it that, thinking back upon that July afternoon, we see so distinctly that flowerbed? We must have passed myriads of flowers that day; why do these particular ones return? It is true, we stopped in front of them, and talked a little and then moved on.
But, though we weren’t conscious of it at the time, something was happening—something.... (37).

Whereas I would identify as cool detachment Woolf’s articulation of what she calls her “intuition” and “philosophy” (“Sketch” 72-3), for Mansfield the understanding of expanded experience seems to transmute into urgency in Mansfield’s conception, an urgency buttressed by a writer’s eye for detail and by a focus on objects that spring up in memory. Like Woolf, too, the “something” for which Mansfield strives is not merely the memory itself; it is also a need to represent that experience, to fill in for the lack Mansfield identifies in the texts she has encountered—a desire for texts that encapsulate the power of the waves crashing against the rocks, of the childhood wonder of seeing all rooms of a domicile simultaneously. Her urgency is the desire for text that matches up to the “glimpses” in one’s day-to-day, that skims the surfaces of experience and somehow shows us what lies beneath.

Like many of her contemporaries seeking after epiphanic moments in their texts, then, Mansfield aims to find a form for experience that grows out of the experience itself, and Benjamin offers us a way to move—dialectically—back to the glimpse as an articulation of that “pattern,” that “something.” Mansfield’s parenthetical question as part of her description of her “glimpses” (“what do I mean?”) points to a seeking after adequate representation for the “moment of suspension” as a route to a new kind of writing marked by the anxiety of the modern subject—a self whose anxiousness rests in a striving after a writing that is somehow both objective (a lens through which the image is shown) and subjective (a passionate, expanded “moment of suspension”), an anxiousness far easier to discern in Mansfield’s writing than in Woolf’s. Mansfield here recalls Benjamin’s archaeologist, seeking fragments that might reveal the whole of the past or the whole of language—in spite of the impossibility and self-destructiveness of such a pursuit. Pushing past impressionism, then, Mansfield speaks in that same letter.
to Dorothy Brett of post-impressionist imagery as a “shaking free”—both from a constricting past and from an inurement in the present:

Wasn’t that Van Gogh shown at Goupil ten years ago? Yellow flowers—brimming with sun in a pot? I wonder if it is the same. That picture seemed to reveal something that I hadn’t realized before I saw it. It lived with me afterwards. It still does—that & another of a sea captain in a flat cap. They taught me something about writing, which was queer—a kind of freedom—or rather, a shaking free. When one has been working for a long stretch one begins to narrow one’s vision a bit, to fine things down too much. And its only when something else breaks through, a picture, or something seen out of doors that one realises it. It is—literally—years since I have been to a picture show. I can smell them when I write. (233)

Here, again, “something [is] happening—something,” but Mansfield’s frames it as a sensory impression (a “smell”) that pushes one out of self-obsession, that process of “fin[ing] things down too much.” Shaking free transmutes into “a picture, or something seen out of doors”; this is the subjective element of the “glimpse”—the refiguring of self through new, complex vision or perception, without departing wholly from the intensity, the “smell” of the experience. Angela Smith points out that the goal of impressionist painting is to invoke “not realism but a heightening of people or objects to give an experience equivalent to the impact made by people or objects in life” (149). Van Gogh’s painting provide a imagistic “glimpse” of sorts for Mansfield, a distinct memory from “ten years ago” that folds into a present moment of writing—in particular a moment of self-conscious refinement of technique “shak[en] free” of its “narrow” particulars and returned to a world of impressions. But it is never a full return, never a complete escape: Mansfield “can smell them when [she] writes[s].” Like the narrators in “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and “A Married Man’s Story,” she is always attempting, in ever more ambiguous ways, to present ineffable experience (the smell of the flowers, the “something” they reveal).

And it is this ambiguous necessity of the “glimpse”—that it must always be presented, but never be fully defined or resolved—that connects it most profoundly to
Benjamin’s “dialectical image” and points to the small but noteworthy difference between Mansfield’s epiphanic moment and that of her contemporaries. Like Benjamin’s materialist historian, finding and arranging (but not explaining) fragments of the past, Mansfield’s narrators—frequently folded into the figure of Mansfield as writer—often set up a provocative contradiction as they divulge their “glimpses”: their images of (self) history set up, and often intensify, a tension between personal investment and objective structures or “pattern[s].” The minimal but suspended difference between Mansfield’s narrators and her own self-portraiture through them further tightens that tension. So the challenge Mansfield, like Benjamin, takes up, is to draw from the complexity of modern experience a foundational structure and to “shake [it] free” of its mooring through an “arrested” image—an image that is problematized by who offers it even as it is presented. Benjamin’s and Mansfield’s techniques converge in what Benjamin calls the “tiger’s leap into the past,” a dislodging of historical fragments and memories from their static existence in the archives (of the self) in order to broaden, often violently, the present moment. Indeed, where for Mansfield “one is flung up” and then “down [...] on to the rocks”—in an action seemingly beyond one’s control (note the passiveness of the verb)—and for Benjamin “the Then and the Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning” (*Arcades Project* 463), agency rests in the pen of the writer. For Mansfield, as for Benjamin, it is not a question of whether or not to write; they are always writing, always striving. It is instead a question of how—and the technique of the tension-filled, broadened, multi-temporal image fell to both writers as the primary technique that could contain these contradictions, though never fully, as they oscillated in their experiences and in the language they used to represent them.
The Oscillating “Kick-offs”: A Benjaminian Politicizing of Mansfield’s “joy” and Mansfield’s “cry”

It is clear from Mansfield’s description of her narrative “glimpses”—and in her relation to her contemporaries—that she had a nuanced sense of how the tension-filled image could work in her writing, not to mention an obsession with refining her technique for its presentation. However, we are still left with the question of politics: what makes these innovations, in themselves, a political project? An answer to this question might come from directing a Benjaminian lens towards Mansfield’s most famous statement of aesthetic intention—in a letter to her husband, John Middleton Murry:

I’ve two ‘kick-offs’ in the writing game. One is joy—real joy—the thing that made me write when we lived at Pauline, and that sort of writing I could only do in just that state of being in some perfectly blissful way at peace. Then something delicate and lovely seems to open before my eyes, like a flower without thought of a frost or a cold breath—knowing that all about it is warm and tender and ‘ready’. And that I try, ever so humbly, to express. The other ‘kick-off’ is my old original one, and (had I not known love) it would have been my all. Not hate or destruction (both are beneath contempt as real motives) but an extremely deep sense of hopelessness, of everything doomed to disaster, almost wilfully, stupidly, like the almond tree and ‘pas de nougat pour le noel’32 There! as I took out a cigarette paper I got it exactly—a cry against corruption—that is absolutely the nail on the head. Not a protest—a cry, and I mean corruption in the widest sense of the word, of course. (107)

Like Raoul, in his meditation on the “geste,” Mansfield’s self-presentation here moves between abstraction—in the play between “joy” and “hopelessness”—and the dramatization of an experience of discovering that conceptualization (“There! as I took out a cigarette paper I got it exactly”). As I explore above, from a Benjaminian perspective, there is a politics of “churning”—of reframing experience and our representations of that experience—in that oscillation. But Mansfield is careful to

32 O’Sullivan notes that this is a reference to a Henri Fabre poem (“Magnetic Chain” 110).
depoliticize her writing, here: it isn’t a “protest” but a “cry,” based on emotion and ecstatic expression. Following from this disavowal, O’Sullivan reinforces the dominant reading when he suggests that Mansfield “places herself, consciously and deliberately, in the tradition of the lyric, the utterance which proceeds not from formulae or set convictions on the purpose or quality of life, but from the pressure of a time, and a place, upon a sensibility” (“Magnetic Chain” 111). Importantly, Mansfield’s show of humility, her crediting of "love" and invocation of floral imagery, follows a well-established trope among female writers of strongly gendering their description of their writing impulses, as a canny way to soften their entry into male-dominated public domains and discourses. Beyond catering to Murry’s (and subsequent male critics’) predilections, though, I would argue that Mansfield’s articulation of her two "kick-offs" sets up a productive oscillation between “joy” and “hopelessness” that plays out as an ambiguity, subtly laced with menace, in her late fiction. As we will see with "A Married Man’s Story" below, both aspects function simultaneously (though not necessarily equally) in much of Mansfield’s late fiction. Indeed, it is in the movement between these "kick-offs”—the way an image of "corruption," for example, tends to enliven and destroy the sensibility of her characters, to open their perceptions to both beauty and "disaster”—that Mansfield’s politics take form: ambiguous images call into question our perceptions; our trust in our memories, in ourselves, in language; and our attachment to bourgeois values (marriage, family, love, respect, even trust itself). In these subtle critiques, which work through form even more than through content, Mansfield’s seemingly apolitical “cry” does the important political work of opening up and of problematizing the “sensibility” that she proffers as her starting point.

Two opposing critical interpretations of this most famous of Mansfield's statements of intention further draw out the implications of a "political" reading of Mansfield’s aesthetic in the way I am proposing. Seeing the passage as a central node in a burgeoning “Mansfield mythology”—maintained most consistently by Murry, who
edited a number of posthumous Mansfield texts—C.K. Stead in “Mansfield and the Art of Fiction” points out that, “again and again,” critics have invoked the “kick-offs” as an entry point to her work (29). For his part, Murry refers to this articulation of “joy” and “hopelessness” as “vital to any true understanding of Katherine Mansfield” (Murry, Studies 86). Indeed, for Murry stories like those in In a German Pension are part of the “negative” kick-off, whereas stories like “Prelude” and “At the Bay” represent the positive, the flowering, “at peace” sort of fiction—caused in part, it seems, by Murry himself, as the object of what he describes as an “unfolding of a new love for her husband” that instantiated that “joy” (Portraits 14). Stead’s interest in demythologizing Mansfield’s personal circumstances—in “disengag[ing] the Mansfield image from some of the mythology that has surrounded it since her death in 1923” (27)—serves his formalist argument, the claim that Mansfield “has a distinct place as one who made certain discoveries about the form of fiction” (27). According to Stead, Mansfield’s late fiction develops narratively through “accretion” (in “At the Bay” and “Prelude”) and “circumlocution” (in “Je ne parle pas Français”; “The Daughters of the Late Colonel”; “A Married Man’s Story”)—the second technique of which “represents something of a technical breakthrough” compared to Mansfield’s contemporaries (29). I am interested in pushing these “discoveries” one step further, to address the way her stories—in their ambiguity, their multi-temporality, their defamiliarizing juxtapositions—participate in and critique a political context broader than Stead’s concern with aesthetic innovation.

Sidney Janet Kaplan, conversely, does frame Mansfield’s experiments with form within a recognizable politics: the project of feminist writing. As such, Kaplan sets up the “kick-offs” as a narrative, a before (“joy”) and after (“hopelessness”), suggesting that this passage demonstrates that Mansfield is “gradually shifting her focus of concern as a writer” (191). For Kaplan, Mansfield’s “cry against corruption” becomes “expressions of outrage against a society in which [usually male] privilege is so marked by indifference to the misery of others that it must demean or ignore any unmediated reaction to
injustice” (192). For Kaplan, this “cry,” as it plays out in Mansfield’s fiction, points to “many levels of influence and obsession”: Mansfield’s “interest in gender differentiation, her dissection of family structure and its inherent conflicts, her Freudian/Lawrencian interpretation of the oedipal romance, as well as her predilections for psychologically associative symbolic patterns, narrative disjunction, free indirect style, and cinematic spatial structuring” (217). For Kaplan this collection of thematic concerns and of “predilections” works an expanded and reframed modernism. She describes this project as follows:

If we consider modernism as Katherine Mansfield tried to shape it, we find a modernism stripped of its tendency toward objectification, stripped of either its apotheosis or its debasing of the feminine. It is a modernism full of doubts, questionings, and terrors, but it is also a modernism that leaps beyond both the despair of the “waste land” and the hierarchical, traditional escapes from it posed by many of her male contemporaries. (Kaplan 219)

Kaplan rightly identifies the chauvinistic context of modernism, one unamenable to Mansfield’s “predilections” and open to her critiques via innovation formal techniques and parodic representations of her “male contemporaries.” In this way, there is a positive flip side to the “doubts, questioning, and terrors” by which Mansfield is said to depart from the main route of “hierarchical” literary pursuits. What I want to pursue further, something deemphasized in Kaplan’s account here, is the multivalent politics of ideological unravelling that is wrought by the “expressions of outrage” Kaplan enumerates. Instead, the oscillations of Mansfield’s formal strategies begin to articulate a political critique at the level of class, or even at the level of capitalist production—more precisely, a critique of capitalism’s ideational structures of time, knowledge, and value which undergird class and gender relations and social reproduction under capitalism. The “glimpse,” the act of representing the unrepresentable, isn’t “escape” so much as direct engagement with the problem of language’s possibilities and limitations—an act that amounts to a form of ideology critique. Indeed, Mansfield does not give up her “real joy” in her late fiction—as is clear, I think, from the ecstasy of
Kezia’s first glimpse inside the doll’s house—in favour of some terror-ridden outside to a patriarchal literary establishment; rather, the complexity of her presentation, the movement and collision of image upon image, contains both “kick-offs” (and both “accretion” and “circumlocution,” for that matter), held in unresolved tension that simultaneously teases out and subverts subtle political investments.

These “kick-offs,” perhaps Mansfield’s clearest articulation of artistic intention, in fact mask the unerring difficulty of her project: to put on the page the indescribable, the too-fine, the too-complex, even if the result is incomplete or imprecise. In this way, the reader is thrust into a series of ambiguities in stories like “Je Ne Parle Pas Français”; for example, we can observe the play of sincerity and self-deceit, innocence and threat, in Raoul’s epiphanic moment—the way it ironizes his unimpressive writerly accomplishments, his unarticulated homosocial desire, and his inability to describe his overflow of emotion, even as it affirms his power over Mouse’s fate. The “not enough” of representation plays into its politics. In a similar way, Benjamin plays with the seeming simplicity of the “matter-of-fact” as much more than mere signification in a letter to Martin Buber, examined in detail in Chapter 1:

My concept of matter-of-fact and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to move toward what was denied to the word; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intense aiming into the core of innermost silence is truly effective. (80)

According to Gerhard Richter, this statement reflects a broad theme in all of Benjamin’s work, the idea “that there is an essential rapport between language and politics. For Benjamin, language is not a mere instrument for the mobilization of this or that ideological position. Rather, it stages within itself the very principles or ground of political action” (28); or, putting it another way, Richter claims that Benjamin—and, I’m suggesting, Mansfield—sought “not a politics of language but a politics in language” (28). The foregrounding of process, of trying but indeed failing to capture that
“something” that Mansfield’s characters cannot quite seem to grasp, is under this view a centrally political action.

Using this recalibrated approach to the unresolvable and the unrepresentable on a story like “Prelude” can illuminate more than just the “wholly negative […] implications” of the famous “white duck” scene, for example. Instead, we can begin to see the scene as more than simply a demonstration of the “destructive and aggressive impulses of the adult characters”—as standard readings of the text have had it (Hanson and Gurr 54). We begin to register the more complex formal effect of Mansfield’s story by noting the stark juxtaposition of the slaughtering of the “white duck” with its mealtime presentation two sections later: “It lay, in beautifully basted resignation, on a blue dish—its legs tied together with a piece of string and a wreath of little balls of stuffing round it” (134). Kezia’s reaction to Pat’s removal of the duck’s head might also be called “beautifully basted resignation,” the way her shock is registered: first through careful, clear, unreflective description as Kezia describes the way the duck’s body “began to waddle—with only a long spurt of blood where the head had been; it began to pad away without a sound towards the steep back that led to the stream […] That was the crowning wonder” (130); then through sheer dislocation as she “suddenly rushed at Pat and flung her arms round his legs and butted her head as hard as she could against his knees” and “sobbed: ‘Head back! Head back!’” (131); and finally through singularized focus as Kezia notices Pat’s “little round gold ear-rings” and asks “huskily” whether “they come on and off.” Left unexplained is whether “they” refers to the ear-rings or to duck heads. Young Kezia uses her own “head” to express her horror, meeting violence with violence, but only after language has failed to aid her assimilation of this new and distressing experience. Interestingly, what bring Kezia back from silence is a seeking to understand the surfaces of identity, a desire that is imbricated with and implicated by the violence that leads to her noticing Pat’s ear-rings. Thus, in a powerful multiplication of meaning activated by a depth of language—one that is ironically
rounded off by duck dinner a few pages later—Mansfield’s narrative perspective draws together violence and gender performance but leaves their interrelationship undetermined.

“[W]hat does a literary work ‘say’? What does it communicate?” Benjamin asks in “The Task of the Translator” (253); he answers as follows:

It “tells” very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not communication or imparting information [...] But do we not generally regard that which lies beyond communication in a literary work—and even a poor translator will admit that this is its essential substance—as the unfathomable, the mysterious, the “poetic”? (253)

If Mansfield’s parallel question above in a dashed-off phrase—“What do I mean?”—has an answer, perhaps that answer is an articulation of form, of language itself. And within that seeking after meaning, not in the what but in the how, one can begin to register all manner of political critique—of gender performance, of colonial oppression, of domestic labour, of economic injustice, of sexual exploitation, of the tyranny of common sense—as I have begun to demonstrate in “The Doll’s House,” “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” and “Prelude.” If unresolvably ambiguous stories are what issue from “kick-offs” marked by joy, pain, hopelessness, and loss, if the result is not in fact a spontaneous expression of some feeling (though it may also be that), can we not propose that Mansfield’s innovative techniques of narrative, particularly the glimpse, draw out a two-pronged effect: both a reframing of the form and possibilities of the female voice in fiction and a reframing of the form and possibilities of political discourse in an equally “hierarchical” bourgeois society? Indeed, this oscillation may be the “magic spark” that “leap[s] between the word and the motivating deed,” a spark powerfully illuminated in the formal experiments of Mansfield’s late fiction.
“Nothing Happens Suddenly”: Moments of Suspension and/as Politics

As we have begun to see with Kezia and Raoul, Mansfield’s narrators stage the oscillations between “sheer joy” and the “cry against corruption” of the glimpse, thereby taking on the voice of Benjamin’s Angel of History. In its structural tensions, in the unresolved, “suspended” images it presents—refracted by an ironic, self-reflexive narrative voice—“A Married Man’s Story” brings together a number of concerns with which this chapter has thus far been concerned: formal innovation, self-representation, the capturing of ineffable experience, the interpenetration of masculinity and violence. Narrated from the perspective of a reflective (but not too reflective) young male writer who feels trapped in a bourgeois lifestyle, the story ends abruptly—a fragment that nonetheless works as a whole. The story is a necessarily truncated ironic meditation on the insufficiency of reconstructed memories, the problem of representing a past that cannot be anything more than our own narrativization. Gregory Powder’s reflections suggest that retracing and rereading the past cannot alone serve as a key to understanding the self nor as a route to escape from unhappy circumstances—though like Raoul, Gregory makes a valiant attempt, critiquing his own understanding and presentation of the past all along the line. Alongside this uncertainty and provisionality, Mansfield deftly interweaves a looming sense of dread and menace—never fully explained or enacted—into the narrative. And this pall is intensified by the uncertain “glimpse” Gregory proffers just prior to the abrupt end of the fragmentary story.

Throughout the text, Mansfield unfolds her narrator’s imaginative life, one that allows him to occupy several places in a single moment, and sets it against his inability to capture his wild or profound thoughts in his writing. The story begins with Gregory sitting at his writing desk while his wife and child sit “in a low chair before the fire”—though the firelight creates “an immense Mother and Child” that is “here and gone again upon the wall” (226). Gregory then imagines himself elsewhere, out in the rain on
the other side of the window pane. In his desire to escape his comfortable (though somehow threatening) bourgeois setting, Gregory opens his imagination to a rainstorm of dangerous actions, though he seems simply to be daydreaming about catching a cab:

While I am here, I am there, lifting my face to the dim sky, and it seems to me that it must be raining all over the world [. . . .] And all at one and the same moment I am arriving in a strange city, slipping under the hood of the cab while the driver whips the cover off the breathing horse, running from shelter to shelter, dodging someone, swerving by someone else. (226)

The narrator refers to these images as “traces of [his] feeling” and not “the feeling itself” (227)—but their intensity indicate a desire for escape from a life in which he feels trapped. There is an immediacy and simultaneity to this imaginative fancy: the juxtaposition of gerunds—“arriving,” “slipping,” “breathing,” “running,” “dodging,” “swerving”—creates a swirling image of flurrying activity that occurs “all at one and the same moment.” Though seemingly an internal mechanism, Gregory’s desire to escape functions like Pat’s “penknife” in “A Doll’s House.” Indeed, like Kezia when the “house-front swung open,” Gregory experiences a moment of sublimity in this simultaneous but multiple image—in the form of experiences and impressions rather than of symbolic objects. In this way, we can also register an affinity with Raoul’s *geste*, that sense of the rightness of his place in the description—though like Raoul’s discovery of his own words, the nearly-hysterical intensity of Gregory’s interpretation of that rainy cab ride, dramatized as an escape from the looming figures of his wife and child, ironizes the whole scene: “As I think that, a mournful, glorious voice begins to sing in my bosom. Yes, perhaps that is nearer what I mean. What a voice! What power! What velvety softness! Marvellous!” (227).

Further on, the narrator, who has now revealed that he is an author who suffers from writer’s block and from an estranged marriage, suggests that his representations of a wandering mind are drawn from a “shadow of inspiration” (232). Gregory reflects
on the way he aligns himself with a clichéd image of a feral child raised by wolves (by what he calls his “fleet grey brothers”):

When I wrote ‘wolves’ it skimmed across my mind like a shadow and I couldn’t resist it. Tell me! Tell me! Why is it so difficult to write simply—and not only simply but sotto voce, if you know what I mean? That is how I long to write. No fine effects—no bravuras. But just plain truth, as only the liar can tell it. (232)

There is an ambivalence here about the possibility of truth-telling, even of the articulation of flights of fancy, and about the status of the writer who pursues it. Through these imprecise and self-doubting musings of another male writer (“Why is it so difficult to write simply”), Mansfield implies that writing cannot but be “fine effects”—a representation of the thoughts that one cannot control, or a series of “bravuras” that obscure the “plain truth.” In a moment of ironic foreshadowing, the reader is given Gregory as the womanly figure overcome with an overflow of inspiration (“I couldn’t resist it”)—a gender representation that oscillates with the dominant image of a man among wolves. The narrator fears the lies in these moments of inspiration, but as we have seen, the “plain truth” for Mansfield resides in the presentation of those moments, regardless of their external validity; what matters is the moment of the thinking itself (in this case the image of wolves), what Henri Bergson would call durée, and of the act of “tell[ing] it.” In his “long[ing]” for an adequate form for his feelings, Gregory unwittingly finds it—revealing his own disconnection and self-doubt, and perhaps, telling the truth without understanding it.

33 Mansfield’s exploration of this tension between thinking and telling corresponds to strategies of self-presentation I identify in the work of Gertrude Stein and Laura (Riding) Jackson. Chapters 3 and 4 explore in detail the implications of what Benjamin, in his discussion of messianic time, calls the act of erfasst or grasping—implying both “understanding” and “recording”—which posits the historical materialist as both the receptor and the purveyor of historical revelation. In Mansfield’s glimpses, the narrator occupies this ambivalent position.
The endpoint of the dialectical process Mansfield sets up—from (mis)understanding to representing to understanding—is a seemingly objective presentation of the thoughts and experiences that “skim” across the narrator’s mind, derived from the assumption that there is a “plain truth” in the external world, and that there is a possible writing free of “bravuras.” And while “A Married Man’s Story” is not a full articulation of a dialectical theory of objectivity in writing, it does make clear that the primary boundary to the “sotto voce” for which the narrator longs is the subjectivity of the act of looking back:

I am always coming across these marvellous accounts by writers who declare that they remember ‘everything, everything.’ I certainly don’t. The dark stretches, the blanks, are much bigger than the bright glimpses. I seem to have spent most of my time like a plant in a cupboard. Now and again, when the sun shone, a careless hand thrust me out on to the window-sill, and a careless hand whipped me in again—and that was all. But what happened in the darkness—I wonder? Did one grow? (235-6).

The narrator’s memory, or rather his lack of “bright glimpses” into his past, moves quickly into a crisis of identity, indeed a crisis of selfhood. The objective image of the plant on the window-sill is, I claim, a wholly subjective aestheticization of the past, an attempt to paper over both his own memory gaps and the materiality of the “careless hand” that seems to have neglected the narrator at the moment he most needed reprieve from the “cupboard.” This dwelling on personal history, but with a particular interpretive lens, is a source of consternation for the narrator, who asks, “Why—to tell what happened last autumn—do I run all this way back into the Past?” (237). This question, an attempt to understand the movement of his thoughts, turns to a further meditation on childhood and on history:

The Past—what is the Past? I might say the star-shaped flake of soot on the leaf of the poor-looking plant, and the bird lying on the quilted lining of my cap, and my father’s pestle and my mother’s cushion, belong to it. But that is not to say they are any less mine than they were when I looked upon them with my very eyes, and touched them with these fingers. No they are more; they are a living part of me. Who am I, in fact,
as I sit here at this table, but my own past? If I deny that, I am nothing. And if I were to try and divide my life into childhood, youth, early manhood and so on, it would be a kind of affectation; I should know I was doing it just because of the pleasantly important sensation it gives one to rule lines, and to use green ink for childhood, red for the next stage, and purple for the period of adolescence. For one thing I have learnt, one thing I do believe is, Nothing Happens Suddenly. Yes, that is my religion, I suppose…. (237)

Like Benjamin in the closing pages of *Berlin Childhood*, Gregory attempts to make a disparate series of remembrances (the “poor-looking plant,” the bird in his cap, his mother’s sewing cushion, and so on) cohere into a pattern—a melancholic “seeing” on par with Benjamin’s Angel surveying of the catastrophe. It is a strategy that only works within the context of the story, as Gregory acknowledges: narrativizing the past is “a kind of affectation” and not a verifiable self-construction. The memories that he articulates might more accurately be called symbols—images meant to contain, though never fully, the complexity of lived and felt experience. Thus, beyond the construction of a narrative arc for the “Past,” an application of arbitrary rules that gives one a “pleasantly important sensation” but little else, the narrator explicitly rejects the possibility of an objective truth about one’s history. He offers as an alternative his “religion”: “Nothing Happens Suddenly.” Mansfield’s narrator’s meditation on the “Past” transmutes into a reverence for “moment[s] of suspension”—so that the articulation of each image, of each “bright glimpse,” becomes paramount, and the connective tissue of narrative, the movement across time, becomes nothing more than a “fine” effect. The recollecting subject, the writer of the self in this configuration, acknowledges that possession of these memories is shared with an abstract “Past” that works most effectively as a constellation of “glimpses,” presented “at one and the same time” like his imagined cab ride away from his bourgeois existence. And it is only as a form of juxtaposition that the writer can feel like he “belong[s]” as a fully coherent subject, as a writer whose account of the present works itself out in an exploration of the past.
Mansfield’s fragmentary story ends with an epiphanic moment of recollection that invokes but does not resolve the tensions playing out in the series of inadequate images Gregory Powder presents up to this point. He has revealed that his father has most likely poisoned his mother and has begun to take in young mistresses, fallen women whose voices Gregory can hear from his upstairs bedroom late at night. One voice in particular sparks a dream where his unconscious sexual awakening is interrupted:

One night I dozed and dreamed she came again—she drew me to her, something soft, scented, warm and merry hung over me like a cloud. But when I tried to see, her eyes only mocked me, her red lips opened and she hissed, ‘Little sneak! Little sneak!’ But not as if she were angry, as if she understood, and her smile somehow was like a rat [...] hateful! (239)

Gregory is most disturbed by the knowledge this figure seemed to possess, not by her anger but by the notion that she “understood” his adolescent desire—that she was able to read him and label him: “Little sneak!” He finds his sexual identity in an external assessment within a dream, an oscillation of exteriority and interiority that Mansfield’s narrator finds “hateful.” Even so, the fraught context of this awakening, that it is derived from an oneiric image of a woman both sheltered and exploited by Gregory’s monstrous father, seems to be a determining influence on his faltering marriage and writing life. Or, perhaps, Gregory centralizes the dream—gives it external validity—as a way to absolve himself of his own sins against his wife and child. Mansfield’s narrator meditates on this paradox by describing a subsequent “glimpse”:

The night after, I lighted a candle and sat down at the table instead. By and by, as the flame steadied, there was a small lake of liquid wax, surrounded by a white, smooth wall. I took a pin and made little holes in this wall and then sealed them up faster than the wax could escape. After a time I fancied the candle flame joined in the game; it leapt up, quivered, wagged; it even seemed to laugh. But while I played with the candle and smiled and broke off the tiny white peaks of wax that rose above the wall and floated them in my lake, a feeling of awful dreariness fastened on me—yes, that is the word. It crept up from my knees to my thighs, into my arms; I ached all over with misery. And I felt so strangely
that I couldn’t move. Something bound me there by the table—I couldn’t even let the pin drop that I held between my finger and thumb. For a moment I came to a stop, as it were. (240)

This “arrested image,” this glimpse that Gregory experiences—in some ambiguous time “after” his disturbing and lurid dream—dramatizes Mansfield’s capacity for suggestively contradictory image-making, enacting what O’Sullivan notes is the “conjunction of inevitable isolation, and the wall of one kind or another which is its physical emblem” (“Magnetic Chain” 105). We can also recognize in this moment Mansfield’s tendency to ironize the profundity of those glimpses by dwelling a little too long upon them. Indeed, Gregory has already revealed himself to be both imaginative and emotionally stunted, which tends to make the reader skeptical of his epiphanic moment here—in the subtle interplay between the productiveness of the flame (producing a “small lake” and a “smooth wall”) and its destructiveness (allowing young Gregory to make “little holes in the wall” that would eventually obliterate it) that suggests the aesthetic cycle of destruction and creation. The flame’s ostensible participation in the cycle constitutes Gregory’s “real joy” of validation and a whole sense of self—with that creeping “awful dreariness” as a manifestation of Mansfield’s “cry against corruption”: that once we “come to a stop, as it were,” we realize that what hangs over the experience are the inescapable and violent catastrophes of our past. In Gregory’s case, the neglect and abuse he suffers as a child, along with his father’s menacing yet invisible violence against his mother, keep Mansfield’s narrator “bound […] there by the table.” What seems to be authorial agency—Gregory’s pursuit of self-definition through patience (“Nothing Happens Suddenly”)—becomes structural inevitability: the young Gregory cannot escape his fate because he is only what his present self constructs him to be, what his readers draw from that representation. In this way, Mansfield gives us a contemplative yet deluded narrator in a double bind: he is determined not only by his past experiences but by the inadequate language he has to represent those experiences. Gregory’s own assertions of masculinity—in his callousness and coldness towards his
wife, in his indifference about fatherhood, in his attempt in his writing to affiliate
himself with wolves (his “fleet, grey brothers”)—point both to inescapable inheritances
from his father (“old D.P” [238]) and to attempts to break free from them. It is Gregory’s
self-reflexivity that opens the door for these explorations, and for the revelation that
perhaps those inherited structures (of family, of masculinity, of destructiveness, of
hatred) can be recorded—perhaps without “bravuras”—but not refigured.

What the particularities of “A Doll’s House,” “Je Ne Parle Pas Français,”
“Prelude,” and “A Married Man’s Story” reveal, overall, is the multivalence of
Mansfield’s narrative strategies. Though in different keys, Kezia, Raoul, and Gregory
attempt to represent a personal history in a disconnected series of frozen moments that
dialectically reveal an awareness of (or a hope for) a subtle pattern—a structure that
cannot be articulated except as a presentation of those “glimpses.” And the objective
truth that dwells behind these images—that writing cannot paper over our catastrophic
pasts and the selves those pasts construct—is only revealed in the attempt to present
them as autobiography, as the memories of a yet-to-be-formed modern subject, and in
the necessary and productive failure inherent in the attempt.
Chapter 3.

Politics of Form/Form of Politics: Gertrude Stein’s Dialectical Grammar

There are two things that are interesting history and grammar. History is historical.

-Gertrude Stein, History or Messages from History 22

The difference is spreading.

-Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons 3

Gertrude Stein represents perhaps the most evocative example of the interpenetration of the dual imperatives that inaugurate this project: “make it new” and “always historicize.” As I argue in the opening pages of this dissertation, a writer cannot construct an absolute break with the past without reference to or reliance on that past as a ground that structures what can and cannot be said or understood. At the same time, a call to reimagine the past “makes new” that historical moment—especially in the case of Fredric Jameson’s commitment to materialist approaches—but never in a finalized and resolved way. Indeed, as I explore in Chapter 1, Walter Benjamin’s more esoteric materialism—his injunction “only to show”—pursues an intensification of those contradictions, as a way to deconstruct the triumphalist historical narratives with which we are constantly bombarded. Stein’s texts demonstrate the productivity of continuously writing through this contradiction. In this chapter I will explore the ways her canny engagement in constant experimentation and innovation is founded on a repurposing of the past and of received structures from the past. This oscillation between newness and pastness, both founded on a “difference [that] is spreading” in
Stein’s experimental prose, activates an irresolvable multivalence of meanings in her texts, and it is a multivalence that troubles assumptions about the structures of grammar and semantics. Stein’s radicality functions at the level of grammar, but it aligns productively with Benjamin’s insistence on the coextension of the past with the present, an imbrication enacted through language in potentially (self)destructive ways—through the archaeologist “churning” the ground upon which s/he stands. I will show the ways that this active problematization of structures of language—structures inevitably fraught with power—begins to register a politics in the morass of seeming meaninglessness fundamental to Stein’s texts.

Stein occupies a multivalent space in the modernist pantheon—both central and peripheral, canonical and avant-garde. Her influence on feminist and queer poetics is unmistakable, and justifies a significant position; Dekoven claims that Stein, up to the 1930s,

went further than any other twentieth-century writer in English (perhaps in any language) in reinventing literary language and form, undoing conventional, hierarchical, sense-making modes of signification—modes that privilege the signified over the signifier in a way that can be considered characteristically patriarchal—substituting, in diverse stylistic modes, a rich, complex, open-ended, antipatriarchal syntactical and semantic polysemy. ("Modernism and Gender" 185)

Indeed, there is a sense of otherness to Stein’s work, of the radically unassimilable: her consistent and wilful insistence on non-sense, on simple language that does not mean (or that multiplies meaning when it does), makes her work difficult to ascribe to a movement, to a school of aesthetics, to a politics—though of course Dekoven here connects Stein’s work to the “antipatriarchal.” More broadly, perhaps we could point to a generalized anti-authoritarianism in all that Stein produced. Stein suggests as much—perhaps ironically—in a 1946 interview:

You see it is the people who generally smell of the museums who are accepted, and it is the new who are not accepted. You have got to accept
a complete difference. It is hard to accept that, it is much easier to have one hand in the past. That is why James Joyce was accepted and I was not. He leaned toward the past, in my work the newness and difference is fundamental. (Transatlantic Interview 29)

Stein here reframes the question of the “new,” so that “making it new” consists of a break from the past, to a place where one cannot “smell” the “museums,” cannot in other words sense the authority of tradition in the artist’s work. If Joyce “leaned toward the past,” Stein positions herself, ironically perhaps, as a voice for the future—or, as I will explore below, as a voice for a permanent or “continuous” present. In this sense, Stein aligns herself with what Raymond Williams points to as the defining characteristic of the avant-garde of this period: “a defiance and finally violent rejection of tradition: the insistence on a clean break with the past” (52). At the same time, the question of history, and its relation to language and (self)expression, serves as a touchstone in much of her corpus. Indeed, this is a primary contradiction throughout Stein’s work—her commitment to, advocacy for, and exploration of both transhistorical permanence and radical historical breaks—and it is an oscillation that complicates any definitive political attachment we might ascribe to Stein’s writing because it sets in motion a number of other oscillations (of gender and class, of subject and object, of political agency, of representation, and so on).

These complications do not preclude a productive reading of Stein’s politics, however. Beginning with Stein’s multivalence, Dana Cairns Watson points to a “revolutionary utopian impulse” in Stein’s work as a whole:

Stein’s several styles of writing advocate a revision and rearrangement of fundamental orders: the syntax of English sentences, the contained and supposedly individualized selfhood of Americans, interpersonal allegiances, and social and political organization. If there is something

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34 As I explore below, this fundamental “difference” is unerringly gendered, as well, so that Stein’s texts—in their refiguring of genre and grammar—constantly work in opposition to the received hierarchies of patriarchal tradition.
wrong with these structures, then language can be studied to diagnose
the problem, and language can serve to solve it—or change it, anyway.
Stein has been canonized for her eccentricity, but that reputation may be
a way of making safe—making cute and quirky—a revolutionary utopian
impulse and insight, with a huge force of life behind it. (1)

While a Benjaminian approach to Stein would work to avoid—or would outright reject—
the notion of “solv[ing]” what is “wrong with these structures,” I am most certainly
following after Watson’s interest in the politics of form (and for the import of that
“utopian impulse and insight” and the “force of life of life behind it”), a politics that is
legible both at the level of the lifework and at the level of the work or even the syllable.
Karin Cope asserts that Stein “was no deconstructionist avant la lettre, plying every
twist of language’s logical play, but an inveterate and assiduous recorder of perceptual
shifts and affective relays” (7). More precisely, we might suggest that Stein was not only
a deconstructionist. We can read the politics in Stein’s work synecdochally, in the
complex textual moments that reveal a broader “insight”—as I will show in my
examination of Stein’s repeated meditations on boyhood and manhood below. Stein’s
work also functions politically at a macro level, through the most substantial of her
innovations: repetition, creating in the scene of writing what she calls the “continuous
present” that, per Cope, “assiduous[ly]” records the “shifts” and “relays” of the social
world. What challenges readers of Stein, and what constitutes her politics, then, is the
search for effective and “affective” strategies of reading—in our attempts, however
unsuccessful, to reconcile the large and the small, the ever-present and the already-
faded, to identify what is recorded or enacted in the seeming non-sense of Stein’s
texts.35 In this oscillating movement of forms, we can begin to register the critique Stein
levels at authoritarian structures of language, at the “authentic” self represented in text,
and at the triumphalist history these “relays” serve.

35 I will examine below the ways Stein’s texts interface with Benjamin’s mobilization of the term erfasst
[grasping and recording], which points up the slip between subjective understanding and objective
presentation—an oscillation with important political consequences, as we will see.
It is a challenge by design, one made more complicated by the writerly self Stein projects in her texts, as Barbara Will argues in her 2000 examination of Stein’s “genius”:

Always alive to the elisions and gaps of signification, Stein herself continually blurred the signifying boundary between a revisionary definition of “genius” as a process of defamiliarization and enlightenment shared by writer and reader alike, and a more standard high modernist sense of the term as descriptive of the autonomous artist hermetically sealed off from public understanding. (11)

As I address in the conclusion to this dissertation, the pitting of the high modernist artist against the masses—a relation codified and popularized by Andreas Huyssen’s After the Great Divide—is perhaps more of a heuristic “signifying boundary” for modernist critics post facto than it was for writers like Stein, who continually dwell in these interstitial spaces. Nonetheless, Stein’s texts assert identity and being again and again—at times miming the myths of the Romantic genius, at times bequeathing semantic power to a public readership. Will argues that “Stein’s central claim to ‘being a genius’ is neither elitist nor wholly progressive and democratizing but conflictual, complex, dialectical: both other-directed and self-legitimating, both anti-authorial and productive of authority” (12). Benjamin helps us to identify the political valences of these unresolved contradictions, so that “genius” can be directed beyond Will’s characterization of it as an identifier for an autonomous and/or collaborative artist. Instead, as we read her structurally and synchronically—as a landscape of texts whose topography and patterns gesture and indicate, though never in a final way—we can begin to see the ways Stein deploys these shifting identities to serve a particular purpose while at the same time calling into question the very identities she mobilizes.

As a way to pry open these complications, and to begin to identify their politics, I suggest that there is in Stein’s distinction above (between pastness and newness) an echo of Benjamin’s “tiger’s leap into the past.” The connection here is not obvious: one might even see Benjamin’s focus on the historical as such—a “leap” that is seemingly always backwards—as diametrically opposed to Stein’s position, however ironic. Her
assertion of difference as “fundamental” points to a desire to break with tradition for some radical alternative that does not reach through homogenous time to an authoritative narrative (reaching back to Homer, for instance) of which, Stein is claiming, Joyce’s texts are a part. Instead, Stein continuously seeks contradiction, producing semantic tension through repetition, grammatical playfulness, elisions and aporia, wilful difficulty—always in the service of the new, the counter, the alternate, and in express contravention of notions of progress, development, and the self-identical subject. In the same way, Benjamin’s model for the historical materialist has no truck with “the past” as a construct that confers that “smell of the museums” on the author or on the narrative he or she is constructing. Instead, through a “tiger’s leap,” Benjamin means to tap revolutionary potential, setting up radical juxtapositions of disparate material from the past with (and within) a politically-fraught present moment, in a jump beyond and beside that of the tripartite beginning-middle-end we might encounter in narrative. For Benjamin, the past is always-already present in the present, but never in a simple cause-and-effect relation: history returns as an echo, as a structural pattern, as a yet-to-be-revealed rupture inherent to every moment. In his “Theses on History,” Benjamin contextualizes his by-now overdetermined “tiger’s leap” as follows:

The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.

(395)

Benjamin’s historical materialist—working, unlike fashion, in the “open air of history”—operates with an explicit politics as he or she mobilizes fashion’s practice of decontextualization in the service of “revolution.” As Sigrid Weigel has observed (11), Benjamin is reframing Marx’s 1851 comments in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte on the bourgeois sellout of the French Revolution:
Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (15)

Indeed, fashion is a strange guide for revolutionary methodology, but for Benjamin it is productive of revolutionary thinking in its oscillation between blaring importance and political insignificance. Fashion’s “nose for the topical” suggests both banality and a deep malevolence; it is an ideological distraction that hides a vacuum beneath its pristine surface—the power and perniciousness of “l’art pour l’art” enacted in the market. But by changing the context and the political valence of fashion’s “leap,” Benjamin posits a methodology for thinking the past otherwise, for piercing that veil even as we acknowledge its power and versatility.

In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein encapsulates this structure in common sense terms (quoting herself in the voice of her longtime partner): “But as [Stein] often says one is always naturally antagonistic to one’s parents and sympathetic to one’s grandparents. The parents are too close, they hamper you, one must be alone” (78). While we might be able to identify the influence of psychoanalysis (the “law of the father”) in her notion of being “antagonistic to one’s parents,” Stein doesn’t elaborate

36 While this chapter is more concerned with the self constructed in the language of Stein’s criticism and histories—rather than her autobiographies that ostensibly present a self—we can identify a further correspondence between Stein’s work and Benjamin’s: a problematizing of the classic autobiographical mode. The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, in particular, stages an oscillation between self and Other, as a radical act of self-historicization that troubles what Philippe Lejeune has called the “autobiographical pact” between writer and reader (29)—“making new” the genre of autobiography in the process.
here on the specific source or cause for sympathy with “grandparents”—except in the negative: they don’t “hamper you.” What does hold us back, however, is the shadow of the immediate past, a cause against which we “naturally” strive. As Stein declares in *Wars I Have Seen*, “I belong to the generation who born in the nineteenth century spent all the early part of my life escaping from it, and the rest of it being the twentieth century yes of course” (90). What seems most productive in these statements is Stein’s undefined, yet somehow “natural,” sympathy with grandparents, a predilection that activates her sense of the historical: she “leaps” beyond the immediate past, but not simply to a new moment. I will explore below the ways Stein’s pursuit of temporal expansion, the “continuous present,” absorbs the grammatical structures bequeathed to her, an inheritance much older (and more radical) than one’s grandparents—belonging to the past, the present, and the future in equal measure. In this way, Stein’s “sympathy” with her grandparents links with her consistent undercutting of narrative development and interconnection. Benjamin’s “tiger’s leap” helps us to see the ways that Stein’s flattening of grammar’s history—through repetition, as I explore below—is a form of “making it new” in alignment with Pound’s injunction (the past pointed towards the future), and a critique that “historicizes,” after Jameson’s “motto” (the present infused with the past).

The subject in history looms over these explorations, as well. Stein’s innovations are a politicization of the seemingly apolitical that function on the same axis and with the same principles of contradiction and repetition as does Stein’s multiplied and ambiguous writerly self. Put simply, the writing subject is subject to the vicissitudes of grammar and history—and the question is how to mobilize this complicity and inurement in text. As I explore below, Stein’s “nose for the topical” in her “histories” of the 1930s is a flair for formal innovation within conservative and mundane subject matter. Through their histories, Stein and Benjamin are proposing a break with “one’s parents,” with received *structure*. Where Benjamin imagines the dialectical image (the
product of the historian’s “tiger’s leap”) as a break with and a breaking of “the ruling class,” an act that engenders “revolution,” Stein in her writing on history refigures the sentence through repetition as a “composition of a prolonged present” that eschews narrative in favour of the infinitesimal lateral movement of syntax itself—a grammatical revolution that moves, I suggest, through the historical even as it seems to reject it. Stein refashions the “arena” of grammar itself, making the “tiger’s leap” from narrative to repetition to what she called “insistence”—a formal shift from the historical to the grammatical, all in the service of that “fundamental” sense of “difference” above. Paradoxically, it is in the minute movement of syntax and meaning that Stein is able to cleave language from grammar, to open up a wide space for semantic multiplication. Here is where we can identify a politics of form—what Fredric Jameson calls the “content of the form,” as I explore below: through these formal (and, I will claim, dialectical) refashionings, Stein inaugurated a movement beyond the structures of the “ruling class” and into the “open air of history.” Through Benjamin’s late critical politics, then, we can begin to see an expressly political radicality to Stein’s widely-acknowledged aesthetic and linguistic radicality: Stein’s is a revolution that works through grammatical rupture within the status quo and thereby reimagines the subject’s relation to the past—refiguring the wreckage of received language and making it say and do something other than mean. If we recall Benjamin’s archaeologist, “churning” the ground upon which he stands, we can begin to identify the ways Stein both wields and unsettles her own “genius,” as a way to call into question the power of identity, of voice, of narrative, indeed of bourgeois privilege, so that language is the site of personal and political struggle and experimental prose is the weapon.  

This chapter brings together several disparate strands of Stein’s writing practice and offers History or Messages from History—a pamphlet first published ten years after

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I will have more to say about Stein’s reframing of the notion of language as a “weapon” in the next section.
her death, a coda to her own history—and other key texts of the 1930s as a reimagining of the relationship between time, memory, and grammar. Via Benjamin’s model of historical materialism, in particular the method and principles behind his dialectical image, I contend that Stein’s syntactical innovation is in fact dialectical, an oscillation that opens up the possibility of revolution in Benjamin’s sense above: her “tiger’s leap” beyond the immediate past, both as a grammatical structure and as a metaphysical concept founded on necessity—determining and limiting the present and, indeed, the future—posits a productive indeterminacy of meaning that allows for a reconception of our structural relation to the past. Stein’s politics of form are an opening up of possibilities. What makes for a “dialectical grammar” in Stein’s work is the way this indeterminacy oscillates with a seductive impression of meaningfulness, declarations from a “genius” to a collective readership that simultaneously use and undercut conventional structures of narrative. As Karin Cope suggests,

[W]hat is special about Stein is that the words themselves are the plot; all the action is there in the play of one word next to another one. One’s task as a reader then is to rediscover the contours of that plot; it’s like a kind of backwards criticism: you start with the grammar and then you discover the plot, the significance of the text. There are not really characters, just parts of speech. (11)

Grammar in History or Messages from History stands in for story, but it is a “plot” fraught with circumlocutions, contradictions, and loose ends that point up the inherent instability of the systems of meaning and narrative—systems that construct and reinforce what Benjamin calls above the “arena” of the “ruling classes.” In this way, Stein’s circumlocutions and repetitions can be read as a form of textual politics that illuminate the cracks in received systems of meaning and in dominant modes of temporality. By their oscillations of meaning and non-sense, of fragment and narrative, Stein’s texts play within existing grammatical structures and semantic patterns while simultaneously asserting that “fundamental” sense of difference. As my epigraph above phrases it, perhaps we can think of this play across structure as the instantiation of the
ways “grammar” and “history” are “interesting,” the ways they interact and combine and separate again. Benjamin’s model for materialist historiography provides a frame for reading the ways the dialectical tension between these structures reveal, celebrate, and shake the workings of overriding systems of meaning that prop up the status quo. In this way, we can begin to see the form of Stein’s politics: the oscillatory reimagining and refocusing in Stein’s texts that opens up for the future the revolutionary possibility of thinking, being, and speaking otherwise. For Stein and Benjamin, finally, the scene of writing functions as the privileged site for this contestation, for the enactment of a dialectical grammar, and the ever-striving, ever-failing figure of the writer—an Angel of History finding a way to speak—becomes the provisional agent of that oscillation.

**Continuous Present or Homogenous Time: Temporalities in “Composition as Explanation”**

What lays the ground for Stein’s radical oscillations is her notion of a “continuous present”—a term that helps to frame my reading of Stein’s politics of form. She introduced the term in “Composition as Explanation,” a lecture commissioned by Edith Sitwell and delivered at the Cambridge Literary Club and at Oxford University in 1926. The Woolfs’ Hogarth Press published the essay later that year. In this essay Stein describes in simple terms her complicated method of composition in her early writing, and how her techniques developed into her later career. She also “explains” how we might begin to understand her texts. The essay begins,

>There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation

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38 As I will explore below, the seeming simplicity of Stein’s declarations belie their complications when we examine the way the grammar troubles singular readings, and when we consider how things change over Stein’s oeuvre. Based on this doubled sense of simplicity and complication, Jameson comments in “Gertrude Stein and Parts of Speech” that readers need to make a decision when encountering Stein’s texts: “Do we trust her or is she a charlatan?” (342)
has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it. (513)

Composition seems to be about the establishment of difference, of finding a way to distinguish one generation from another—or on the flip side, the difference between generations can be registered in the act of composition, or perhaps in the reading of a composition. Like Laura (Riding) Jackson’s “telling,” to which I will turn in Chapter 4, composition is a word that functions simultaneously as verb and as noun, both an act and a text, establishing and naming difference across a temporal boundary. Stein moves from this opening in the essay to a reference to Lord Grey’s famous declaration that WWI was “talked about” as a nineteenth century war, but it was “to be fought with twentieth century weapons” (513). Stein explains,

[W]ar is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared. Writing and painting and all that, is like that, for those who occupy themselves with it and don’t make it as it is made. (513-14)

This frame politicizes Stein’s exploration—in invoking problematics of belatedness, materiality, temporality, and indeed, horrific violence—while at the same time intimately linking war, nation-building, knowledge production and art. Temporal awareness (in war and in art) seems to revolve around preparedness, in particular an awareness and incorporation of a shifting epoch, so that Lord Grey’s remark shows a simultaneous canniness about shifting realities and about the materials needed to survive under a new paradigm. Of course, Stein is linking war with art in their pursuit of method, not their results—but one implication seems clear: for Stein the question of artistic praxis, of asserting difference and of being “prepared” for the onset of modernity, is on par with the art of warfare and of statecraft.
This oscillation is, for Stein, the basis for an aesthetic as well as a representational politics. As she claims in Lectures in America, “The business of art as I tried to explain in Composition as Explanation is to live in the actual present that is the complete actual present and to completely express that actual present” (104-5). Living and expressing are coterminous in this equation: one must “live in the actual present” and “completely express” it simultaneously—although Stein’s rhetoric makes use of additives (“and”) to keep these aspects separated, too. In a further link on the chain of paradoxes, Stein makes it clear in “Composition as Explanation” that this paradoxical space between living and expressing, like that between likeness and difference, is somehow a product of (or a reflection of) her context, and it’s founded on a narrative: “So far then the progress of my conceptions was the natural progress entirely in accordance with my epoch as I am sure is to be quite easily realised if you think over the scene that was before us all from year to year” (520). Compare this seemingly straightforward statement of mimetic accuracy with the way Stein offers war as the exemplar of the contradictory space occupied by what she calls the “continuous present”: “And so war may be said to have advanced a general recognition of the expression of the contemporary composition by almost thirty years” (“Composition as Explanation” 521). In a species of futurism, Stein suggests that the Great War—in its revealing of the bankruptcy of 19th-century thinking, of the destructiveness of reason—“advanced” aesthetic understanding, hurtling it headlong into the 20th century.39

Further, in her own self-construction, Stein argues that her temporal experimentation was already revealing the inherent violence of 19th-century thinking; the war just brought to the light (helped us “recognize”) what the innovative practitioner was

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39 Of course, Stein also claims in Wars I Have Seen that “war makes things go backward as well as forward” (2). While I am not necessarily arguing for an unerring consistency in Stein’s arguments, I would suggest that that “things” to which Stein refers here are material experiences—not aesthetics. Our perception “go[es] backwards” as the world goes “forward,” perhaps. A deeper exploration of these movements would add nuance to an examination of Stein’s engagement with time, but it is outside of my scope here.
already doing. Stein offers her compositional technique—specifically, her pursuit of a “continuous present” in the scene of writing—as a mirror that was “in accordance with [her] epoch,” and ahead of her contemporaries.

These invocations of an era of war—one whose violences ostensibly draw out the innovations in the realm of the aesthetic, if after the fact—represent an avant-garde position, Stein’s alternative to futurism. In another vein, Benjamin argues in the artwork essay that futurism is the most violent culmination of fascism and of *l’art pour l’art* (the “aestheticization of political life”) but which also “has the merit of clarity” (121). What futurism’s logic reveals, like that of the Great War *post facto*, is the weight of an epoch of accelerating technologies (of war and communication), of the ways one’s historical moment weighs on the individual. As Franco Berardi, following after Benjamin, has recently argued, “The aestheticization of life is one aspect of [the] mobilization of social energies. The aestheticization of war is functional to the subjugation of everyday life to the rule of history” (36). Berardi is pointing to large structural forces—“social energies,” history, capitalism—that unavoidably encroach on an aesthetic project. Similarly, in “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein claims, “each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing” (105). The question for the avant-garde becomes: How might the artist, in this case a writer like Stein, escape the strictures of these structures? Like the gaze of Benjamin’s materialist historian, and unlike the refinements of the futurists, Stein’s provisional solution in her poetic technique turns on unresolved contradictions. Stein’s articulation of her method folds the tension between present and future, between living and expressing, between war and art, into one space of writing, but that action never results in a smooth and untouched landscape, nor a violent clearing away of the clutter of the past. Rather, to use Benjamin’s language, Stein assembles a wreckage, an uneven piling up of fragments. And this, Stein implies, is because the “epoch” never allows for such balance. Instead, throughout much of her corpus Stein presents seemingly simple statements of fact or
being\(^{40}\)—leading to a seemingly obvious and perhaps oversimplified truth about (in this case) the art of writing about the “present” and the art of war. And then she undercuts this obviousness\(^{41}\) and simplicity through contradiction, reversal and inversion, and most importantly, repetition. In these complications, Stein works around, if temporarily, the “rule of history.” The complexity of Stein’s sense of historical progression—its non-subjugated “everyday” opposition to the futurists’ forward-facing utopianism, at the expense of the present and the past—allows her to claim in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that even though they “had their big show in Paris and it made a great deal of noise, [...] everybody found the futurists very dull” (117-18).

Alternatively, the question for Stein remained *how* one was to go about “preparing” for what was to be “made.” Following after its invocation of Lord Grey’s observation about war methodology, “Composition as Explanation” proceeds to trace the development of Stein’s aesthetic methods. Speaking of her “negro story called ‘Melanctha’” (from *Three Lives*), Stein observes,

In [“Melanctha”] there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present. A composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world as it has been these thirty years it was more and more a prolonged present. I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was

\(^{40}\) As we shall see below, this pattern is particularly apparent in her later writing on history—especially *Geographical History of America* and *History or Messages from History.* Again, Stein’s insistence on repetition complicates any ostensibly obvious declarations she might make in these cases.

\(^{41}\) I am using “obviousness” in the sense Louis Althusser uses it in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” his seminal late Marxist essay:

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the ‘still, small voice of conscience’): that’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true! (46)
simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that. I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural. (517-8)

Stein here describes a shift that occurs outside of her own agency (“forming around me”; “natural”): a reframed temporality, which she then was able to “create.” Within that “constant recurring and beginning,” Stein seems to set up an opposition between Lord Grey’s sense of altered temporality (our discourse and method hadn’t yet caught up with technology and the changing times) and her notion of a “prolonged present”—which somehow flattens “past present and future” into an equivalent landscape. She doesn’t specify how or why this effect occurs, though Stein points to the (at least partial) externality of the “composition forming around me,” which she then seeks to “create” in the continuing scene of writing. And though “nobody knew why it was done like that,” Stein constructs this experience in ontological terms—“being in the present”—in a space and time where externalities merge “naturally” with the internal, where she “knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one.” Like Lord Grey, then, Stein is identifying a structural or contextual shift in epistemology at the turn of the century, but her enactment of it in her writing is “prepared” for the shocks. Indeed, Stein sees this rejoinder to Lord Grey’s lament playing out in “Melanctha” not as a narrative break, but as a “prolonged present.” The “composition” for Stein as she looks back on “the world as it has been these thirty years” contains both the fundamental shift in experience across time—it had a “marked direction”—and the present moment of being that breaks with that sense of temporal development. We can see the ways that Stein’s method here parallels Benjamin’s dialectical image, which also posits a simultaneous development and simultaneity: as I explored in Chapter 1, Benjamin posits a narrative that stays still (“arrest”) and moves forward at the same time (“montage”), in the form of an image rather than in the act of composition. Although, in the realm of technique, we can plot Benjamin on the opposite axis from Stein—image-based montage vs. grammatical repetition—the political valences are parallel, as I explore below: for both Benjamin and Stein, these methods invoke
historical or epochal implications, an attempt to identify or to articulate change without reinscribing the old ways of knowing and being.

“Composition as Explanation” traces Stein’s writing career, moving on to examine *The Making of Americans* [1911], where Stein sees this principle of “constant recurring” coming to fruition, in the form of what she calls a “continuous present” activated by repetition, creating an ambiguous temporal space of the “composition” where likeness and difference coexist, if uncomfortably. The competing ambiguities of Stein’s “continuous present” can be registered in the complex series of repetitions in “Composition as Explanation,” where she tells us,

> Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. So then I as a contemporary creating the composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again and then everything being alike then everything very simply everything was naturally simply different and so I as a contemporary was creating everything being alike was creating everything naturally being naturally simply different, everything being alike. (520)

In this short paragraph—the closest she comes to defining the “continuous present”—Stein uses repetition to multiply meaning across a quite limited vocabulary. In both this formal restrictiveness and in the paraphrasable content, we can identify a disjunction between the act of writing (“composition”; “creating the composition”; “groping”) and the product of that writing (“the composition”)—and it is a fissure opened up by the tension between difference and likeness, and between object and subject. Throughout “Composition as Explanation,” Stein sets up a complex and counterintuitive relation between the writing subject (“I as a contemporary”) and his or her past. The past seems to be an aporia in Stein’s “continuous present”: she speaks of what is “going to be,” what is “contemporary,” what “is”—but not what was, except in the past progressive form (“I…was groping”; “I…was creating”), a verb tense that uses gerunds to edge towards the present. What is “continuous,” then, is the reality of Stein’s experience at
that moment and her attempt to capture that experience, to transcend the limitations of received grammars. Like the “prolonged present,” the continuous present is held in place by “beginning again and again,” Stein’s fundamental commitment to repetition to which I will turn below. Stein focuses on the effect, on “creating everything naturally being naturally simply different”—an act of creation which produces simultaneously its opposite (so suggests Stein’s parallel syntax): “everything being alike.” Indeed, the final clause of this passage dramatizes much of the productive ambiguity of what I am calling Stein’s “dialectical grammar,” which aims to set up a scene of writing (“being in the present”; the “continuous present”; the “contemporary” moment) that activates an oscillation between subject and object as a way to problematize our relation to narrative time, to what Benjamin called “homogeneous, empty time” (“History” 396).

Stein’s description of her method in “Composition as Explanation” points up the ways that narrative time, that notion and experience of “past present and future” to which Stein had become “accustomed,” is an impossibility in a composition that attempts to capture a present scene of writing. This impossibility is revealed in part by Stein’s use of the definite article: “the” composition—the object produced in the act of composition—is already past because the present it represents has already passed. So, Stein’s “groping” to capture a “continuous present”—using repetition to mime a likeness—stages the writing subject’s encounter with the irreducible “difference” of the past. Stein rejects the attempt to recapture a “simple” narrative movement from past to present—which for Benjamin is only ever a subjective and politically-fraught reconstruction wrought by the “ruling class”—and instead repeats and repeats again in order to create a scene of writing that never pauses but somehow maintains the impression of a temporal continuity between the writing subject and the written object, a productive movement between self and text that never fully synthesizes into a narrative of the self, into “the” composition full-stop. The openness of Stein’s method—its problematizing of “natural” grammars, its projection of the scene of writing, the
forms of its publication, the uneven presence of an authorial “I,” Stein’s varying “explanations” of the text, the potential engagements and confusions of readers—create the conditions for the text to oscillate between a static and an ever-moving temporality. To recall my first epigraph, if there are two things that are interesting—grammar and history—it is in the “continuous present” that Stein intertwines those interests. And as we will see in the sections below, while the political intent behind Stein’s poetic strategies is perhaps impossible to discern, we can begin to read the politics of her mobilization of grammatical structures, the ways language can refigure the subject’s relation to time, and indeed time’s relation to the self.

“Grasping” the Content of the Form: Theorizing the “Continuous Present”

The oscillations inherent in Stein’s conception of the “continuous present” leave open the possibility of unredeemable meaninglessness: what is Stein actually saying in these seemingly incomprehensible texts—these texts that repeat and recycle, never seeming to offer something resembling graspable meaning? Is this simply a formalism, empty of content? My answer to this concern draws on Fredric Jameson’s more recent work on the dialectic, the source for my suggestion that Stein is offering a “dialectical grammar” through her reframing of the temporal register. In his “Introduction” to The Modernist Papers, Jameson works through the classic opposition between form and content, and borrowing from linguist Louis Hjelmslev, he proposes a four-quadrant model (the

42 The role of the reader is an aspect of this study worth further pursuit, but beyond the scope of the argument I am developing here (though I address Stein’s own strategies of reading below in my discussion of “insistence”). I point to heuristic openness as one technique Stein is using to construct a space of oscillating meaning in her texts—that between reader and text. More relevant for my purposes, though, I also have been exploring the ways that Stein (self)represents the innovative writer in “Composition as Explanation,” a figure who through repetition can be seen as both a seemingly simple reflection of the “world” and a figure beyond or ahead of the present moment. For more on how the reader adds an important layer to the picture, see esp. Lisa Siraganian’s “Out of Air: Theorizing the Art Object in Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis.”
“content of the content,” the “form of the form,” the “form of the content,” and the “content of the form”). Using this more nuanced sense of the interplay between form and content, Jameson posits a dialectic in which the first three terms above are sublimated—though never cancelled—by the “content of the form.” From that critical “perspective,” Jameson argues that

it is not a vicious circle, I think, because the new one [the “content of the form”] is also the only perspective from which the usefulness and indeed the indispensability of the other three [“content of the content”; “form of the form”; “form of the content”] could be appreciated. It also constitutes the only productive coordination of the opposition between form and content that does not seek to reduce one term to the other, or to posit illicit synthseses and equally illicit volatilizations of an opposition whose tensions need to be preserved at the same time that we become aware of how philosophically incompatible each of these terms is with respect to the other one. (xvii)

Jameson articulates and gives a name to Benjamin’s oscillating historiographic method, one that seeks to maintain a tension between oppositions, without resolving, cancelling, or “volatizing” the relationship to the point of uselessness. Language and history are the ground for this kind of criticism, a dialectical operation that for Jameson serves a revelatory heuristic function: it tells us how to interpret textual phenomenon and then interrelate them with their context—without falling into critical sinkholes of formalism (form of the form), positivism (content of the content), and New Criticism (form of the content). In other words, Jameson’s suggestion offers a critical method for heeding his injunction at the beginning of The Political Unconscious to “Always Historicize!” The movement from content to form across these four quadrants forces a reckoning with these modes of reading in their historical specificity, without superseding the present critical moment. And because it is dialectical, even the “content of the form” is subject to further reframing—our readings are never closed. This openness allows us to historicize and politicize Stein, even at her most bizarre and circumlocutory. This process starts with a focus on the “content of the form”—a sense of awareness and sensitivity to structure that tells us something not only about the way the text works upon the reader,
but about the way the text works out the contradictions of its age. Therein lies the content in an enterprise seemingly only about form, about the proper representation of a present moment, without seeming consideration for the larger significance of such a pursuit.

Throughout this chapter, I have been arguing that the activation of irreducible tensions between past and present—pursued at the level of syntax and grammar—comprises the politicized “content of [Stein’s] form.” Stein implies this argument near the end of “Composition as Explanation” when she remarks: “The time of the composition is a natural thing and the time in the composition is a natural thing it is a natural thing and it is a contemporary thing” (522). The grammatical structure of this sentence complicates the ostensible parallel between time and naturalness—the assumption that a “contemporary” temporality will come naturally in the act of composition, which the writer of course does in the present moment. Stein’s repetition, with a subtle prepositional shift (“the time of the composition” vs. “the time in the composition”), puts the temporality “of” the scene of writing in tension with the temporality identifiable “in” the text produced by that writing. This incremental shift through repetition also points up other temporalities “of” the composition (the historical context “of” that text, for example) and “in” the composition (the use of tenses, for instance, or the insertion of historical identifiers like names and dates). Stein affirms the seeming naturalness of the act and fact of writing, the clear path to “completely express[ing] that actual present,” but the repetition itself—the very source of that naturalness, according to Stein’s “in/of” parallel above—calls that affirmation into question. Is it possible for time to be both “in” and “of” a “composition”—both the act and the object, both the historical and the compositional moment? These and other oscillations, laid out as a chain of syntactical paradoxes and repetitions, lay bare Stein’s political significance to her epoch: in an era hyperaware of its own place in history—at its most extreme, as an apocalyptic endpoint to time and human history—Stein’s writing
posits contradiction and nonsense enacted on the page (“composition”) as the site of revolutionary energy, even as meaning, language, and grammar stagnate under the weight of historical inheritance. Because they intensely use and reuse simple grammar and vocabulary—always both meaningful and meaningless—Stein’s forms and structures oscillate between an austere rejection of progress (through the intensifying of ambiguities) and an unmitigated celebration of it (through an absolute rejection of meaningfulness), without landing finally in either location.

Indeed, Benjamin’s critique of progress helps to open up further Stein’s grammatical refractions of the temporal, to identify their political “content.” In one of the few examples of a critic applying Benjaminian language directly to Stein’s work, Kelley Wagers claims that in “Melanctha” Stein “opposed” the “narrative of historical necessity, the language of ‘certainly,’ ‘always,’ and ‘never’ [...] by writing sentences ‘shot through’ with ‘now’” (27). In concert with this sense of temporal expansion that Wagers identifies in “Melanctha,” we could argue that this linking of the grammatical with the historical plays out in Stein’s later writing, as well. Indeed, repetition and contradiction activate a complicated temporal space in nearly all of Stein’s sentences, as

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43 Ziba Cher Rashidian’s doctoral thesis, *Immemorializing Modernity: The Ruse of Memory in Walter Benjamin, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein* offers the most extended examination of the intersections between Stein’s writing and Benjamin’s theories of modernity. However, the central question Rashidian explores—the irruption of laughter in Stein’s work and its connection to Benjamin’s theory of experience—is tangential to the present study. There are a few other examples of Benjamin’s criticism coming together with Stein’s writing, but usually as part of a broader study of modernity, technology, allegory or symbolism, where either Benjamin’s theoretical armature plays a small role or the subtleties of Stein’s texts are deemphasized (see for example, Franken 117; Will 153; Edmond para. 3; Sussman 36).

44 Wagers acknowledges the blatant racism that underlies Stein’s “negro story” but points to the complexity and fragmentary nature of her narration in “Melanctha,” arguing that Stein’s desire was not to “transcend history” but to “write it” (27). The material reality of black experience in the fin de siècle period cannot be discarded, nor should it be appropriated as Stein seems to do (see Doyle 263). The complexities of her language, however, do add a layer of critique (or at the least symptomatic expression) to Stein’s writing, here and elsewhere. As we shall see below, Stein more effectively moves between materiality and language when dealing with the inequities of gender construction than she does with race or, indeed, class.
well as her paragraphs. That word “contemporary,” a writerly identity Stein takes up in “Composition as Explanation,” as we have seen, figures productively in this reading: Stein’s constructions of the past—through portraiture and self-portraiture and through historiographical declarations—undercut causality in favour of a flattened landscape of writing about causes, effects, temporal relations. But this writing never enacts, affirms, confirms the fact of causality, of what led us to the “contemporary” moment, but instead plays with the markers of time and interrelation. As Wagers suggests, the depth of signification that Stein builds into her syntax is analogous to Benjamin’s notion of “now-time.”

However, a level of complexity is missing in Wagers’ description: she conflates Benjamin’s “messianic time” with his “now-time”—a misapplication of the nuances of Benjamin’s position on historiography that indeed reveals Stein’s own complex stance on temporality. In the first addendum to his theses on history, Benjamin writes,

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus between various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this...

45 Though beyond my discussion in this section—where I am placing Stein’s work in the context of Benjamin’s theories of temporality and history—we can see the movement between self-construction and past-construction, framed in the language of philosophical discourse, in a suggestive passage from Geographical History of America:

There is no doubt that human nature is not interesting and the human mind has always tried to be busy about this thing that human nature is interesting and the human mind has made so many efforts always it is doing this thing trying to make it be to itself that human nature is interesting but it is not and so the masterpieces always flatten it out, flatten human nature out so that there is no beginning and middle and ending, because if there is not then there is no doing and if there is no doing then there is no human nature and so to do without human nature which is not interesting is what within the human mind is doing. (158)

Stein seems to set up an objective truth, here: that “human nature is not interesting” because it is founded on a causal or developmental narrative (a “beginning and middle and end”). In its privileging of the “human mind” over “human nature,” the “masterpiece”—which as Dana Cairns Watson points out is referring to Stein’s own text, to a self-representation, as much as it is gesturing towards a literary canon (109)—seems to counteract this problem by “flatten[ing]” this temporal development.
consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like beads of a rosary. He grasps [erfasst] the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time. (397)

Benjamin’s point of departure is also Stein’s in “Composition as Explanation,” and this reframed historiographical method takes a tripartite form here. Most importantly, via the “tiger’s leap,” the materialist historian “grasps” [erfasst] the constellation of the present with the past. This constellation, what Benjamin calls elsewhere the “dialectical image,” captures “now-time” as a present moment that is shaken by its juxtaposition with the detritus of the past. In its final form, this deconstructive act is oriented toward the future—towards the revolution that will inaugurate “messianic time.” The key ambiguity that activates this movement—a non-narrative that nonetheless moves from past to present to future—is erfasst, which can be translated both as “grasp” and as “record.” These two simultaneous actions oscillate between a subject understanding his or her epoch and a subject writing his or her epoch. If the goal is “establish[ing] a conception of the present” (or, per Stein, “groping toward a continuous present”) these aspects of erfasst—grasping and recording—seem to be interdependent, or simultaneous. Further, Benjamin suggests that a temporality outside of ‘clock time,’ the revolutionary advent of messianic time, is carried through this anti-narrative stance. What brings Stein and Benjamin together, then, is the oppositional stance Wagers identifies in Stein, the reaction against “historical necessity,” and the push to “grasp” and to “record” the historical as a simultaneous and contradictory phenomenon that is, nonetheless, “natural” and “contemporary.” And we can begin to register the revolutionary potential of Stein’s ostensibly simple grammatical explorations in the minuscule temporal gap between grasping and recording, between perceiving the “contemporary” and developing and enacting that perception in language. Indeed, the “content of [Stein’s] form” can be found finally in the unassailable opposition to
received narrative techniques, in the strategies developed to combat them: using 20th
century language to fight a 19th century war of forms.

“Remembering is also confusion”: Writing the Self and/as Insistence

There is an additional aspect of Stein’s poetics worth considering at this juncture, an
issue that brings the subjectivity of the writer and the reader to the foreground:
“insistence.” Stein uses this word to describe her use of repetition to build sentences
and paragraphs that, through incremental shifts in grammatical structure and syntax,
accrete with layers of contradiction. Stein’s substitution above of “in” for “of” in “the
time [in/of] the composition” is an exemplary instance of this strategy. In The Making of
Americans, Stein connects insistence to the repetition that activates the “continuous
present”: “The essence of […] expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each
time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that
they should use exactly the same emphasis” (288). Stein is identifying a tension between
exact repetition and the incremental changes that can occur as you say something over
and over: recall for example “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”: each occurrence of “rose”
in the line shifts the reader’s sense of the word itself—they are repeated but not
identical—which opens up symbolic and semantic associations with roses and with
“roses,” so that Stein can claim, “[I]n that line the rose is red for the first time in English
poetry for a hundred years” (qtd. in Meyerowitz “Editor’s Foreword” 7). In Geographical
History of America, Stein elaborates on the movement from repetition to insistence via
an analogy to reading at a hair salon:

I found that any kind of a book if you read with glasses and somebody is
cutting your hair and so you cannot keep the glasses on and you use your
glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by
word makes the writing that is not anything be something. (115)
For Stein, insistence—activated by “emphasis”—builds unevenness into an otherwise flatly repeated syntactical presentation. And the singularity of these sorts of expressions (“exactly the same emphasis” is “not possible” with each repetition) works the same way that reading glasses repurposed as a “magnifying glass” force one to read “word by word” and thereby parse indiscriminately the sentence—making it “be something.” Stein is building on her aesthetic, here: the directive implied in the technique—“if you insist you must...”—sets in motion the post facto creation of “something” in meaningless writing while sitting in the barber’s chair. As such, Stein’s insistence helps her to get out in front of imposing that assignment on the reader (by avoiding creating “writing that is not anything”). On this logic, Stein’s readers don’t need to sit in barbers’ chairs in order to experience her texts as “something.”

In concert with the reframing of the reader’s experience, forcing new strategies of reading, insistence in Stein’s poetics also productively complicates the relation between the writer and the scene of writing. In particular, Stein sees and attempts to represent though “insistence” the oscillation between the act of perception and the act of representing that perception—what Benjamin aptly calls erfasst. There is always a slip between reality and text because Stein sees insistence not only as an aesthetic technique but also as an external reality. People repeat and insist, just as Stein’s writing does—or so Stein attempts to “grasp” [erfasst] through her poetic technique. Referring to her composition of Making of Americans—though also speaking more generally about her corpus—Stein discusses in her Lectures in America the multivalence of the repetition she observes in those she works to portray in her writing:

I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people, I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different. (“Portraits and Repetition” 138)
The metaphysical operation Stein sets up here goes something like this: Stein the writer listens to conversation in a state of openness to what she is observing; attempts to *grasp* her subjects’ “bottom nature” (Stein’s term for her sense of a naturalistic human typology) as revealed in the “infinite variations” within language repeated “over and over again”; and manages through insistence to *record* (to “tell all”) the “movement of [her subjects’] thoughts,” rather than “the actual words they said.” This writerly process reveals a universal multivalence: “their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different.” The role of insistence, then, is to traverse these repeated “thoughts and words” with varying emphasis—so that the *sameness* in the repetition becomes *difference* in the insistence. Devoken points out that, although repetition tends to pare down the range of word choice,

In “insistence,” repetition is never verbatim; rather, the narrative moves forward in incremental shifts through what Stein called a continuous present. Meaning is steadily reformulated in each present moment, with no reference to previous formulations, therefore inevitably repeating (because unaware of) them, though in modified form. (“Modernism and Gender” 185)

The movement of Stein’s aesthetics of “insistence”—and indeed her writing itself, as we will see—oscillates between at least three contradictions simultaneously in what Dekoven calls later on an “incantatory mode” of writing (195). First, the writer’s self-positioning moves between a modulating “emphasis” and a divinatory sort of listening—an enactment of the act of listening itself (but with “great intensity”) that somehow registers an objective truth about our “bottom nature.” Second, Stein’s method both affirms and unseats the very basis for meaningful signification through its shifting reformulation of the same word, in what is both an accumulation and a scattering of

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46 “Bottom nature” is a contested term in Stein’s nomenclature. For example, Alyson Brickey has pointed out that the standard reading of the term—as a human typology that “pervades [Stein’s] work”—is complicated by Stein’s “writing at the syntactic level” that “complicat[es] the process of categorization” (3).
language. Finally, there is the “rise and fall and tell all that was inside them,” that impetus both towards and away from narration.

Stein’s *Geographical History of America* offers a telling example of the productive tensions of “insistence.” Throughout the text, Stein repeats metaphysical abstractions about “the relation of human nature to the human mind” (7), twisting reason and logic into a Möbius strip of circumlocutions. As Stein avers in her lectures, use value and narrative come under particular scrutiny, an examination set in motion by insistence. For example, early on in the text, Stein places the following three sentences on the same page:

What is the use of being a little boy if you are growing up to be a man [....]
What is the use of being a little boy if you are to grow up to be a man [....]
What is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man. (22)

While these three sentences denote the same lament (and I note that its connotations are expansive—regarding masculinity, ageism, utility, socialization, patriarchy, and so on), Stein sets up subtle shifts in the tense of the verb “to grow”—“growing up”; “to grow up”; and “going to grow up”—while repeating precisely the main clause of the sentence. Temporal development plays out in both the form and the content here. In statements about the causal connection between a man’s childhood self and his adult self—lamenting the loss of youth, perhaps, or the cruelty of men—Stein moves from the present progressive (focus on action currently taking place) to the future progressive (focus on the course of the action) to the future simple (action with a definite endpoint in the future). The first sentence “insists” on the boy’s current state of “growing”; the second sentence “insists” on the abstract process of “growing up” itself; and the third sentence “insists” on the endpoint of that process, on the man that “little boy” is “going to” become. These meditations on boyhood and manhood recur throughout *Geographical History*, in a repetition of the basic grammatical elements above—but with
minor variations and returns: each of these sentences are repeated in their exact grammatical formulation later in the text. On one level, in these sentences Stein offers a critique of a patriarchal system that turns innocence into cynicism and power-mongering: “naturally,” the process must happen, in spite of its seeming uselessness. At another level, though—indeed, through repetition and insistence, here—Stein implies that the problem of patriarchal control is a problem of causal temporality itself. No matter how the verb is temporized, a boy inevitably becomes a man, but he cannot jump the queue and be handed the reins prematurely. In this way, the “little boy” is infused with a menacing potentiality, even in his childishness; he is always already the cause and the effect of patriarchal masculinity. And while a full articulation of this antipatriarchal project—one that Marianne Dekoven, Ziba Cher Rashidian, and others explore in detail—is beyond the scope of the present chapter, what we can identify is the effect of insistence, of Stein’s subtle grammatical alterations within a repeated syntactical structure: a critique of causality itself, identifying and calling into question the progressive narratives that determine the fundamental forms of our language. Why, indeed, must a boy become a man—“what is the use”?

These interpenetrating possibilities—which amount, I am suggesting, to a dialectical grammar—point up what insistence inserts into repetition: the writing subject, in all its contradiction, as it works to put in textual form complex abstractions and equally complex material experiences. On the other side of the aesthetic coin (how a reader experiences this complexity), Stein suggests that the complex effects of insistence are analogous to cinematic representation. Stein remarks in “Portraits and Repetition,”

As I say what one repeats is the scene in which one is acting the days in which one is living, the coming and going which one is doing, anything one is remembering is a repetition, but existing as a human being, that is being listening and hearing is never repetition. It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the
emphasis is different just as the cinema has each time a slightly different thing to make it all be moving. (100-1)

For Stein, insistence makes the act of writing (the “thing” that one is “actually doing” when “one repeats”) move like a cinematic reel—which is indeed a series of infinitesimal variations between each frame. If one were to shift one’s gaze between two consecutive film stills (in an operation not unlike Stein’s use of eyeglasses as a magnifying glass), the differences in focus and angle may not be apparent. But it is precisely that barely measurable shift that “make[s] it all be moving.” Later in the same lecture, Stein folds this paradoxical “emphasis” (both “still” and moving) into a reframing—and ultimately a rejection—of the act of remembering:

I continued to do what I was doing in The Making of Americans, I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statements of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing [...] and I did a great many times, say it, that somebody was something, each time there was a difference just a difference enough so that it could go on and be a present something [...] You see that in order to do this there must be no remembering, remembering is repetition, remembering is also confusion. (“Portraits and Repetition” 104-105)

Once again repetition functions as a reinforcement of “one thing”—“a present something”—but articulated by the variations (“just a difference enough”) produced by a “continuous succession” of “statements” made “a great many times.” We get, in other words, a sense of the subject of the portraiture’s bottom nature (that “something” which is ostensibly simple and natural) only through the complex movement of these changes in inflection, activated by modifications in syntax. Like the “dialectical

47 Dekoven makes a similar claim about Stein’s repetition as analogous to film, in the way
image”—which according to Benjamin contains of “the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts” (AP 475)—there is a productive tension in the simultaneous stasis and movement at play in Stein’s elaboration on insistence, though again it is at the level of language rather than image. In both its construction of its author (who is listening) and in its effect on its reader (who is, in this formulation, watching), Stein’s sense of “remembering” remains static through repetition and in motion through insistence. Unlike the “dialectical image,” however—which takes its cue from cinematic montage, from a stark juxtaposition of elements—Stein’s “insistence” activates tension through incremental shifts that flatten narrative development, and thereby open up and multiply what one hears, what one remembers.

For Stein this method, in its homology with film, calls into question the act of remembering as something outside of the present moment of writing or reading. As she says, remembering is both “repetition” and “confusion.” As a way to bring together the competing strands of this discussion, I would like to claim that Stein’s poetics oscillates between two possible claims about memory. On the one hand, the writing subject positions herself as a listener who repeats what she hears, but in doing so identifies and articulates (by the implications of her “insistence”) a certain conception of time—an anti-narratological “now-time”—and an identity or bottom nature. Like Benjamin’s materialist historian, Stein’s writer in this formulation both is and is not “objective” in her presentation. One the other hand, the gap between “grasping” and “recording” is reproduced in a notion of remembering as both confusion and repetition. In whom is

in which each frame largely repeats but slightly shifts the frame before it. Each frame is a new picture shot in the present moment, and therefore it is different from the one before because each present moment is different from the one before, but, when the camera has remained focused on the same thing, each frame largely repeats the one before. So, repetition, which seems to presuppose memory, can in fact negate it. In the Steinian continuous present, the shifting repetition of insistence is inevitable because you rediscover and reinvent in each moment what you know. If you knew already you’d already known it you wouldn’t have to say it again. (“Gertrude Stein’s Narrative” 25)
confusion produced by all this repeating? If the writer insists—or if the reader reads with a magnifying glass and thereby creates his or her own insistences—why are we still confused? Repetition moves us both towards and away from confusion because of the incremental changes of grammar in Stein’s work. In other words, if we must textualize that which we grasp—and if what we grasp is a relation to time that dwells outside of received and authoritative understandings of temporality—we set up a “scene” of writing that problematizes the writer’s relation to her subject matter and the reader’s experience of that very scene. An acknowledgement of irreducible difference of meaning-making, of syntax, leads Stein to make formal choices that oscillate between oversimplistic obviousnesses and unassailable nonsense. And this oscillation begins to register the dialectical play in Stein’s repetition—especially in her insistence on insistence in her repetition—and in her temporal reframings: the simultaneous stasis and movement of a “continuous present” in the scene of writing, and in the scene of reading, that opens up and undermines the ideological constructs of her time (gender, narrative, identity, and so on).

**History or Messages from History: “feeling of time” vs. “sense of time”**

I have dedicated much space in this argument to establishing the formal strategies at work in Stein’s texts—what she imagined them to be doing, and what those articulations suggest about the potential politics within those strategies. And while Stein consistently rejected “remembering” as a route to adequate expression—or as the sufficient route—she did have a great deal to say about history.48 This is the place where the “content of the form” in Stein’s work starts to come clear. As I will explore below, *History or Messages from History* takes as its subject matter the problem of

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48 Indeed, *Geographical History of America* and *The Making of Americans: Being the History of a Family’s Progress* mobilize the term “history” in their very titles.
history as such. Like Mansfield’s “A Married Man’s Story” and (Riding) Jackson’s The Telling, History or Messages from History—in its complex textual interactions and contradictions, and in its emblematic richness—succinctly encapsulates the problematized temporality and subjectivity Stein works to articulate in her methodological explorations. Stein’s intensely self-aware text stages not only her budding celebrity (and, indeed, notoriety), but also her oblique engagements with metaphysics, poetics, and politics in her better-known texts. And, because it was not published until after her death, History or Messages from History serves simultaneously as a coda to Stein’s experimental writerly techniques and as a ghostly continuation of that “continuous present.”

The ostensible option Stein’s title offers—History or Messages from History—effectively thematizes the role of the historical in Stein’s work more broadly. In one sense, Stein is offering alternatives via the ambiguous “or”—between the experience of history (ontology) and the knowledge of it (epistemology), between “grasping” history and “recording” it [erfasst], and as we shall see below, between “feeling” history and “sensing” it. Indeed, the problem and the question of history bears much weight in Stein’s corpus. For Stein, insistence (repetition plus emphasis) is one powerful route to writing a “complete history,” as long as it is accompanied by “love” and a sense of presentness—as Stein suggests in a famous passage from The Making of Americans that brings together a number of the concerns I touch on above:

There is then now and here the loving repetition, this is then, now and here, a description of the loving of repetition and then there will be a description of all the kinds of ways there can be seen to be kinds of men and women. Then there will be realised the complete history of every one, the fundamental character of every one, the bottom nature in them, the mixtures in them, the strength and weakness of everything they have inside them, the flavor of them, the meaning in them, the being in them, and then you have a whole history then of each one. Everything then they do in living is clear to the completed understanding, their living, loving, eating, pleasing, smoking, thinking, scolding, drinking, working, dancing, walking, talking, laughing, sleeping, everything in them. There
are whole beings then, they are themselves inside them, repeating coming out of them makes a history of each one of them. (263-4)

History—a “completed understanding”—becomes the site for a movement from interior (“themselves inside them”) to exterior (repeating coming out), from “bottom nature” to “whole history.” It is an implied completeness, however: in Making of Americans we seldom encounter characters engaging in the actions Stein lists (“living, loving, eating, pleasing, smoking, thinking...”); instead, Stein offers a repeated and recycled metaphysical exploration of the possibilities of language and grammar—a long series of ostensible false starts and circumlocutions. As I’ve suggested above, it is precisely these moments of formal experimentation that reveal the “action” underlying them—so that a sense (even a contradictory or paradoxical sense) of her subjects’ “flavor” or “mixtures” or “being” implies those actions. This is a dialectical oscillation because all those gerunds (“-ing”) that Stein suggests are “in them” are more properly conceived of as outcomes of one’s “flavor” or “being,” but Stein’s description above posits something more like a feedback loop. And, importantly, it is a feedback loop activated in language—more specifically, in a writing founded in the “now and here” on the loving repetition,” in a writing of grammatical insistence. This ambiguously-situated “history” in Stein never offers an expected sense of closure or completeness (even if Stein uses the word), but rather more and repeated language. In this sense, messages from history make history—just as, dialectically speaking, the structures of history make its messages.

Through this unresolved contradiction between being and expression, between grasping and recording, then, the “or” of Stein’s title stands in for the oscillating writerly self—and for the scene of writing. Within this oscillating space, which is both an inside and an outside, Stein’s historiography reckons with the inside and outside of temporality. Repurposing her rejection of “remembering” in earlier texts, Stein argues in Everybody’s Autobiography that Geographical History of America

[...] meditates a good deal about how to yourself you were yourself at any moment that you were there to you inside you but that any moment back
you could only remember yourself you could not feel yourself and I therefore began to think that insofar as you were yourself to yourself there was no feeling of time inside you you only had the sense of time when you remembered yourself and so I said what is the use of being a little boy if you are to be a man what is the use. (306-7; emphasis added)

The subtle temporal shifts in this passage begin to articulate the method of historiography Stein pursues in *History or Messages from History*. In this passage, Stein sets up a distinction between “feeling of time [“inside you”]” and “sense of time” [“only” what you “remember”]—falling on the side of “feeling” but attesting to its impossibility too. By the potentially ironic logic spooled out here, we cannot grasp the present moment: as soon as you stop to “remember yourself,” to “remember back,” you are in the realm of narrative time. That “sense of time”—activated, perhaps, by that notion above of “past present future” to which we are “accustomed” (“Composition as Explanation” 517)—is contrasted with the unattainable “feeling of time” (which is evacuated, if it ever existed, as soon “you were yourself to yourself”). For Stein, this lost “feeling” seems to be a problem both of metaphysics and of *erfasst* [grasping and recording]. Or, put another way, this is a problem both of *history* and of *messages from history*. Our interiority in this formulation is defined by “sense” and not by “feeling”—not in any conceptualizable or representable way, at least—because narrative time (“remembering”) does not allow for the completeness of what is “inside you.” As Stein tells us in the passage from *Making of Americans* quoted above, what does allow for that completeness, for that “feeling of time” that breaks the cycle of growing up (into a “man”), is “loving repetition.” In other words, it is in the scene of writing—one informed by an aesthetics of insistence and the “now,” and one dubious towards the efficacy of “remembering”—that these swirling concerns can find adequate (if provisional and oscillating) representation in a Steinian “history” that, in its movement, is somehow objective even as it pursues a supposedly pure interiority.
Like Benjamin in his autobiographies, the Angel of History’s melancholy enacted through the archaeologist’s “churning,” Stein’s ambiguous history is mobilized by a complex textuality; indeed the “feeling of time” that Stein attempts to “grasp” is nothing but the textualization of the complexities of being (the interior and the exterior on the same plane; the “flavor” both of the writer and that which she observes and records). And, again, repetition activates and keeps in play these competing “feelings” through a reframed temporality that inserts grammar as a stand-in for history. The scene of writing created by Stein’s method of portraiture—as she conceived of and practiced it throughout her writing career—also functions as a sort of self-portraiture. She frequently places herself in her texts, but always at some remove from the ostensible subject matter. Whether through the donning of a mask, as in Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, or through the discourse of meditative philosophy, as in Geographical History of America, Stein keeps a critical distance from the textual object, but she is never too far away. As we have seen, Stein’s technique of insistence is a (temporary and provisional) insertion of the writerly self upon the text—as a way to reframe temporality and to offer a (self)portrait that is not tainted by rationalistic, cause-and-effect “remembering.”

The most effective way to show (not tell) how this movement and oscillation—Stein’s “feeling of time”—works in History or Messages from History is to examine several of the patterns at work throughout the text. First, a word about the complicated structure of the text, which works out some of the ambiguity of the “or” in the title. Stein’s 40-page prose-poem is divided into three parts, the second of which is subtitled “messages from history” (28-47). Although it isn’t labeled as such, one can conjecture that the first two sections are “history” (8-28). Unlike the second part—which like Geographical History of America offers contradictory definitions and explorations of what “history” is or does—the first half partially describes domestic situations and objects and offers declarative statements without clear reference or context. The first
half of the text is not further subdivided, with the exception of “An Interlude,” which has further subheadings: “Begonias” and “Symbolism” (14-15). A further complication: there are actually two “Part II” subheadings (21, 28), the first of which mentions “history” for the first time, in a suggestive paragraph that serves as the epigraph to this chapter: “There are two things that are interesting history and grammar. History is historical” (Messages 22). We will come back to the complexities of Stein’s “interest”—as well as the productive slip between “history” and the “historical”—below. After the first “Part II” (which indeed is difficult to place in either half of the text) comes “Part II: Messages from History” (28), the section of the text that tackles the word “history” in a broad range of permutations. The section is far from ordered and logical, however: the second half is subdivided into thirty-two numbered sections, which because of repeated and skipped digits in the sequence only goes up to twenty-three. All but two of the subsections are short (less than a page) and suggestive—though in spite of this structural consistency the relationship between the subsections is unclear. What is clear is that the second half more directly addresses the ostensible subject matter of the text, history, though perhaps with less paraphrasable “meaning.” To further complicate matters, several of the figures and images that recur in the first half of the text return in the second half (dogs, chickens, birds, grapes, pears, bakers, symbolism, “satisfaction” [16, 45] and so on). Considering the wilfully disordered text—that nonetheless suggests interrelationships—what is the function of the “or” in the title? Is Stein offering options for her readers: the experience of history vs. the definition of it, traversed simultaneously by everyday material objects? Or, as is my inclination, is the text—which is about narrative, on one level—rejecting any clear-cut distinction between what history is and what it says?

Or, turn that around: the “messages” in the latter portion of the text have a lot to say about history. Nearly every subsection offers some definition or exploration of history—which opens up the possibility both of contradiction as meaninglessness (due
to sheer volume) and of patterning that might point to a broader meaning. As a way to begin to tease out these contradictions, I have compiled below every instance of the word “history” in the latter half of History or Messages from History, in the order in which they appear in the text:

“There are two things that are interesting history and grammar. History is historical” (22) [...]
“She made her have no hope of being married. That can never be history. It was too bad that he was never hurried. That came [to] be historical” (23) [...]
“Anybody here is here for history.” (23) [...]
“History is placed where it is and hope is full of wishes.” (24) [...]
“No history is proof against everything” [...]
“Moonlight in the valley is before and after history.

History of a lady whose grandchildren told her they were a king and she did not believe that he had come.

History of his making it be there were for them taken.” (25) [...]
“The lesson of history so she says is that he will do it again but will he we hope not” (Messages 32) [...]
“A famous wife is married to a famous poet both beloved. This is what history teaches” (33) [...]
“What is history they make history” (33) [...]
“Intention is not history nor finality finality is not history. Think what is history” (34) [...]
“History is the learning of spectacular consistency privately and learning it alone and when more come they receive” (Messages 37) [...]
“History is this they may I say add leave that.” (38) [...]
“What is history he felt that it was not a foolish thing to do.” (42) [...]
“History teaches us that whether clouds have in the part of them a spiral movement made by the action of the wind or not as long as the barometer shows no change the rain will continue, at intervals, with pleasant weather interspersed” (43) [...]
“What is history. They make history. Just why do they like birds seen in the way he saw them it was very pretty and made it be very welcome in the telling” (44)

What do we do with all of these definitions and explorations of “history”? The movement of repetition and insistence offers at least six avenues of inquiry: 1) definition by way of the negative—what history is not (“Intention is not history nor
finality is not history"); 2) the movement of ambiguous pronoun referents ("that"; "this"; "it") that point not only to history but elsewhere, as well; 3) the play of rhetorical questions immediately followed by answers to those questions ("what is history they make history"); 4) the role of agency or activity ("this is what history does"; "it was not a foolish thing to do"; "they make history"); 5) geographical metaphors of history ("anybody here is here for history"; "history is placed where it is"); 6) history and/as pedagogy ("History teaches us..."; "This is what history teaches"; "The lesson of history...").

Several more groupings could be made, but each of these avenues plays across the tension between the “feeling of time” and the “sense of time” in Stein’s formulation above—a tension already fraught by further contradictions of identity and memory, as I suggest above. We can recognize, for example, the movement from ontology (“feeling”) to epistemology (“sense”) in the casting of history as agent (what it “does”) and as teacher (what it “teaches”)—which, while not precise opposites, do function along complex and competing trajectories.\footnote{One could frame these trajectories politically: “doing” can be aligned with revolutionary action and change, while “teaching” can be framed as a fundamentally conservative act of reinforcement. Of course, one might also plausibly reverse this polarization (see, for example, Žižek’s \textit{Sublime Object of Ideology} for a critique of undialectical political “action” and bell hooks’ \textit{Teaching to Transgress} for revolutionary pedagogy).} In addition, we can begin to see the ways spatial metaphor restages the tensions worked out much more discursively in \textit{Geographical History of America} between temporality and notions of expansiveness, indeed pointing up our reliance on space to reimagine the temporal (and \textit{vice versa}). Stein’s grammatical indeterminacy is most evident in her ambiguous use of pronouns,\footnote{Charles Caramello has succinctly summarized Stein’s grammatical experimentation, with particular attention to pronouns, as follows:} which call into...
question declarations of being and knowing and teaching—a problematic most evident when she asks, “Think what is history.” Each “this” and “it” has multiple possible referents, the majority of which are simply absent in the structure of each paragraph. If “the lesson of history” is that “he will do it again,” for example, we can read the “it” both as the concept of history (history as repetition, in a variation on the truism that history repeats itself) and as some unknown action that “we hope” he won’t do again. In this ambiguity, the question—“what is history”—refocuses our attention not on the act of definition but on the placement of grammatical units. In this way, we are asked to think about the “what” as an indeterminate determinant of “history.” Indeed, it is not a question but an open-ended, ever-shifting answer.

This is the substance of Stein’s dialectical grammar: the inseparable oppositions in Stein’s work—feeling/sense; ontology/epistemology; time/space; activity/passivity; self/history; ambiguity/declaration; understanding/translation; grasping/recording; and so on—collide and amalgamate, clash and reintegrate, building an unprecedented formal complexity. These competing tensions and contradictions never fully resolve or dissolve; they are never adequately mediated by a dialectical method that would seek synthesis between oppositions; they never develop towards some political end. Instead, History or Messages from History builds a web of tightly-woven strands, stretched nearly to the breaking point. Or, to reapply the metaphor of movement extant in Benjamin’s historical materialism—or indeed, in Stein’s invocation above of cinema’s repetition as both movement and stasis—the text activates an oscillation between a vast number of oppositions, each modulating and resonating with the others. Stein’s insistence builds

Stein enforced a continual shifting and sliding of the linguistic surface by manipulating semantic and syntactic units within a double movement of phonic and graphic play. [...] She introduced personal pronouns with ambiguous, inconsistent, or nonexistent antecedents to confound further any clear discrimination of speaker from auditor and writer from reader, and she often shifted within a single sentence, to the same end, between declarative, interrogative, and imperative voices. (Henry James, Gertrude Stein and the Biographical Act, U of North Carolina P, 1996, 193)
the *impression* of development, the sense that the text—through its discursive exploration and incremental repetition—will arrive at a definition of history, or at a “message” with which we may gain understanding, solace, truth. However, that impression is undercut radically by the uneven relation between ideas and words, by the way the dialectical movement of Stein’s insistent grammatical play moves both towards and away from historical and/or historicized understanding. This oscillation between meaning and nonsense, across varying and competing oppositions, engages a politics by opening up space for the possibility of thinking the past otherwise—in an act that reveals and upends received structures of language, those forms that maintain the status quo and reinforce dominant ideologies.

“[A]n appointment which has been kept”: Towards a Dialectical Grammar

In the previous section, I omitted comment on one passage on history from the latter half of *History or Messages from History*—the longest and most fascinatingly contradictory of Stein’s explorations of pastness, time, and significantly, gender. The meditation comes on the penultimate page and features a number of the competing oppositions that Stein patterns throughout the text:

> History is this. He is not happy because he is worried by his refusing to be able to have his hopes succeed rapidly one after the other not that he has hopes to fulfill but he has hopes which follow all the while there is a great bitterness because he goes when he does and he comes as he does and he does nothing without refusing such as has been asked of him. This you can see sounds historical and in a way it is historical. It is not his history it is historical thank you very much. (43-4)

As we see with her repetition of the (anti)narrative movement from “little boy” to “man”—and in “our” fervent “hope” that “he” will not “do it again”—Stein’s definition of history is informed by the insistences of a continuous present and is set in oscillatory motion by a refiguring of gender and gendering. If history is “this”—what has come
before and ambiguously, what is to come in the subsequent paragraph—it seems to be inflected with emotion caused by “worry” over deficiencies of the self: a disappointment in one’s inability to “succeed rapidly one after the other” and a “bitterness” about having one’s “hopes” dashed by an inability to refuse what “has been asked of him.” History in this configuration seems to gather around hopes and expectations, both from within and from without. And the actions, reactions and emotions “he” experiences happen in the present—the only implied past occurs externally: what “has been asked of him.” In grammatical terms, this phrase participates in the present, as a verbal noun that modifies his “refusing,” using present perfect progressive tense. In this way, the source of his unhappiness “sounds historical” when in fact it is another species of Stein’s “prolonged” or “continuous” present.

But I would suggest that what makes it historical—“in a way,” at least—is the gendered nature of this pseudo-narrative. It is significant that “He” is the agent or actor in this passage, and that the texts dismisses the possibility of “his history,” because his foiled hopes—particularly the expectation that they will “succeed rapidly one after the other”—follow a model of triumphalist history that has served men far better that it has women. In its focus on the affective response of its agents and subjects, Stein’s “history is this” grounds gender in experience, in a slightly askew sort of materialism, exploring aspects of the feminine through domestic objects (especially in *Tender Buttons*) but more often defining it in the negative, in engagements rather with masculinity, rationality, order, in the lack of fit between these received structures (“what has been asked of him”) and the actions and abilities of the men (and, by proxy, women) affected by the system. A little boy will inevitably grow up to be a man, whether he (or we) wants to or not—and even if he strives “to have his hopes succeed,” he comes to the realization that these hopes in part are externally derived. In this way, *History or Messages from History* stages the contradictions of *structures* that are experienced individually but have much wider-reaching social implications. The above passage also
serves as an illuminating counterpoint to Benjamin’s problematically figurative (and
decidedly un-materialist in this sense) use of masculinity and femininity in his theses on
history:

The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which
is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a
standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is
writing history. Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past;historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The
historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called
“Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his
powers—man enough to blast open the continuum of history. (396)

Benjamin focuses explicitly on systems of “the past” and offers “experience” as a
response to the atrocities of historicism; however, he also mobilizes sex work as an
analogy for the insidiousness of progressive narrative, of the empty time “historicism’s
bordello” peddles. Stein’s construction of the “historical” above problematizes this
comparison, at the level of language: perhaps the quest to be “man enough” is precisely
the source of that “eternal” image against which Benjamin so eloquently fought. And
perhaps Stein’s refiguring of time as a subtle “transition” which is also “stand[ing]
still”—a radicalization of the “control” Benjamin seems to be seeking in this thesis, his
tendency to lean on one side of the opposition—is in fact more dialectical than
Benjamin’s method here. Is Stein’s a more evocative and powerfully political articulation
of Benjamin’s call for revolutionary method, activated by that “weak messianic power”
that mobilizes the detritus (read: language) of the past and the present in service to a
time yet to come, a utopic future? Indeed, gender imbalance is a decided blind spot in
Benjamin’s work,\textsuperscript{51} a blind spot Stein’s complex structural critique begins to bring to light—even as it moves in a political alignment with Benjamin’s corpus more generally.

Gender, then, is the oscillation that sets in motion the other myriad oscillations in \textit{History or Messages from History}, and we can see this movement at work throughout the text. If masculinist definitions of experience and history dominates the latter half of her text (the “messages”), the feminine—domestic objects and Steinian tropes (dogs, fruit, marriage, flowers, etc.)—jumps to the fore in the first half (“history” itself). So the false choice, the “or,” between history and messages from history also traverses the opposition between feminine and masculine modes of time, memory, history, understanding, and language. An examination of one of Stein’s tropes in the text gives a flavour of this “either/or” that functions more like a “both/and.” A few pages before the section break, Stein tells us, “A hen is not a chicken she is an appointment which has been kept” (20). Unlike “his history,” which consists of failures and disappointments, the hen keeps her appointments. We can also read this blandly declarative statement as a feminine alternative to “growing up to be a man”—and an alternative to being “man enough” to “blast open” history: she’s “not a chicken,” but she “is” a fulfilled expectation—an “appointment” answering to both natural and social causes. There is something refreshingly perfunctory about Stein’s declaration, an “obviousness” that masquerades as a profundity yet oscillates between these possibilities.

In the structure of the text, there is something productive of more meaning here, and we can see it in the patterns, in Stein’s insistent repetitions, that point us towards a

\textsuperscript{51} Eva Geulen examines this blind spot in detail in “Toward a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin’s Writing.” In spite of Benjamin’s problematic representation of women in his work (and treatment of women in his personal life), Geulen argues that Benjamin’s pursuit of “alternatives” to “the idealist dialectic of subjective and objective, particular and universal” points to his applications in feminist scholarship (161). A deeper engagement with the question of Benjamin and gender is beyond the scope of the present study—though it certainly opens up important questions about how far a symptomatic feminism can be read in masculinist writers like Benjamin.
way to encapsulate what I’ve been calling “dialectical grammar” in her texts. On the second page of the text, Stein gives us this insistent sentence: “When made a link with then linked with men linked with a pencil or a pen linked with a pen wherein chicken are kept” (9). Stein “link[s]” together the question of masculinity, the valences of writing (“with a pencil or a pen”), stricture or social control, and poultry—the last of which we can read, in the patterns of reference further on in the text, as a feminine counterpoint to what is “linked with men.” And she sets up something of a narrative: “then” implies a progression from “ma[king] a link” to “link[ing] with men” to “linked with a pen,” a movement from thought to identity to expression. But that narrative is abruptly cut off by the redoubled “pen,” the shifting from pen as origin of writing to pen as origin of restraint. The pen pens the chicken in, just as the male tradition of writing—the masculinist tradition against which Stein was always working, if in idiosyncratic ways—hems in the “hen.” But, as we learn later on, the “appointment” must inevitably “[be] kept”: the feminine voice pierces through the veil of patriarchal control in Stein’s work, especially when she tackles traditionally male subjects (philosophy, history, politics, metaphysics, philology). Her most effective weapon is grammatical reframing, using rhetoric “linked with men” against itself, unraveling its own logic.

This irreducible indeterminacy, this structuring of opposition upon opposition upon opposition—never producing resolution or synthesis—comprises the political substance of Stein’s dialectical grammar. We can illuminate this politics by returning for a moment to the second epigraph to this chapter, and to Stein’s opening salvo against Joyce and his ilk. Stein’s politics are activated by what she calls “fundamental difference,” a difference that is “spreading” by way of innovation at the level of grammar in Stein’s texts: in the ambiguous function of verbs like “is” and “does”; in the nonreferential or counterreferential pronoun; in the untraversable space between history and historical; in the patterning of text and intertext, which makes the signifier more and more slippery even as paraphrasable meaning accrues to it; in the irreverent
movement of irrationality couched in the rhetoric of reason. Finally, Stein’s politics show forth in her reframing of temporality, and by extension history, via a complex and contradictory “continuous present” that marries representation to “feeling” while dismissing remembrance and the progressive narratives it carries along with it. Following after Williams and Jameson, I argue that even more so than in the content of this experimental new sense of time, Stein’s is a politics of form—a complex enactment and undercutting of the strictures and structures of her patriarchal, commoditized, imperialist, heterosexist milieu. More even that Benjamin’s historical materialist, then, Stein’s writerly self—in the scene of writing that stages many of the contradictions of the writer’s act of representation—sets in motion the tensions of modernity and gives grammar the power to intensify the experience of ambiguity rather than control it.
Chapter 4.

Laura (Riding) Jackson’s Forms of Telling

Now time has reached the flurrying curtain-fall
That wakens thought from historied reverie
And gives the world to uninfected discourse

- recurrent preface to (Riding) Jackson’s editorials in Epilogue (1935-37)

THUS shall evolve the language of the future.

-Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism” [1914] 154

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time.

-Benjamin, “Konvolut N,” The Arcades Project 462-3

Laura (Riding) Jackson’s complex and multi-faceted writing life spanned much of the twentieth century: it traversed and responded to, as Jo-Ann Wallace points out, “the three most important literary critical movements of the last sixty years: New Criticism, feminism, and deconstruction” (111). Because of this breadth of engagement, (Riding) Jackson offers an illuminating case study for the mode of modernist self-representation that I have begun to sketch in this project, a figure that oscillates between the subject and object of writing, in both the text and the scene of writing. In particular, I posit that (Riding) Jackson’s refusal, as of 1938, to participate in public discourse around poetry—her (in)famous “abdication” from public writing that lasted until 1962—plays a central role in constructing a coherent image of her work. There is an overarching irony in her renunciation: in her private writings during her hiatus, (Riding) Jackson actively engaged
with the very question of collective discourse, of the possibilities of language to speak universal truth. Combined with her prolific output up to 1938, culminating in *The Poems of Laura Riding*, and her very public renunciation of poetry in 1940, the relative paucity of public work—bumping up against her expansive work after 1970 that culminated in the posthumously published *Rational Meaning*—is noteworthy. As I will explore below, this self-silencing suggests that for (Riding) Jackson self-construction in language hinges on reader reception, on being read *the right way*, even as the difficulty of the work forecloses the possibility of that fulfillment through the Other. Indeed, this paradox of self and other—more specifically of authorial identity and a linguistic plenitude or readerly understanding—can be read fruitfully as the central dialectic at work in (Riding) Jackson’s writing, a dialectic that gathers together in what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “singular-plural” identity, or what (Riding) Jackson calls an “identity of opposites.” My first epigraph, which was also the epigraph to each issue of *Epilogue*, helps to frame this tension as follows: what purpose does a rethinking of the social meaning of “truth” in language—of a language “uninfected” by the mis-shapings of selfishness and historical inheritance—serve when that obsessive work remains for nearly three decades behind a “curtain-fall,” in the private possession of a poet who has “abdicated”? If (Riding) Jackson is refusing the past—the source of that infection—is she seeking for what Mina Loy calls “the language of the future” or what Benjamin calls the “now”? If, as Benjamin suggests, the present contains the past, how do we go about “recognizing” this “truth” in (Riding) Jackson’s work, which seems to reject the past altogether? Is it possible to make the “leap” from Benjamin’s Angel looking backwards to (Riding) Jackson “telling” the present?

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52 (Riding) Jackson was the editor of *Epilogue*, a journal of criticism and poetry that published three annual volumes from 1935 to 1938 and featured collaborations with many prominent writers in the London literary scene of the 1930s. Robert Graves, with whom (Riding) Jackson earlier had wrote the important *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, served as assistant editor.
As a way to begin asking these questions, the present chapter casts (Riding) Jackson as a Benjaminian Angel of History, but in reverse: (Riding) Jackson’s angel surveys the detritus of language and *chooses* self-silence, rather than having her voice stoppered by the winds of progress—and when she does speak, across her three-decade hiatus, it is to articulate the process of clearing the wreckage of the past, of imagining a revolutionary future where language and time, as well as the singular and plural, are coextensive. Benjamin’s historiography serves here as a way to bring together Laura Riding, poet-critic, and Laura (Riding) Jackson, philosopher of language—to place these complicated self-constructions self by each, to register their complicities and complications, so that (Riding) Jackson’s abstractions and assertions reveal both the value and the seeming impossibility of her philosophical project. What the oscillations of these competing and combining selves offer—indeed, what we can project across the seven decades of (Riding) Jackson’s oeuvre—is an unerring critic of synthesis, a subjectivity ever in opposition to the compromises of bourgeois values, that “muddle” against which (Riding) Jackson’s writing, poetic or otherwise, always strove. Further, in her striving after an alternative time—outside of the mundane temporality posited by poetry and history—(Riding) Jackson echoes Benjamin’s pursuit of “messianic time” as a rejoinder to “homogenous time” that has produced progressive historicism and ultimately, fascism.

This more politicized portrait of (Riding) Jackson offers a rejoinder to critics—most of whom refer to her as Laura Riding—\(^{53}\)—that have tended to focus on two interlocking features of her oeuvre: 1) her obsession with truth and truthfulness in

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\(^{53}\) Among the names she used in her long career—and despite the fact that it is, as Ella Ophir states, a rather “cumbersome” construction (85)—I am choosing to use Laura (Riding) Jackson throughout this chapter when discussing (Riding) Jackson’s lifetime of work, or examining her approach to language, history, time, and so on. This is (Riding) Jackson’s preferred nomenclature, after her renunciation of poetry and her marriage to Schuyler Jackson shortly thereafter. Beyond that, using the later name fits with my approach, as I am positioning (Riding) Jackson as a Benjaminian Angel of History looking back at the detritus of a long writing career.
language (Jerome McGann, Ella Zohar Ophir, Joyce Wexler, Carla Billitteri); and 2) her disavowal of poetic practice towards the end of the 1930s (Lisa Samuels, Jo-Ann Wallace, Michael Masopust, Barbara Adams, David Stuart Reid).\(^5^4\) Indeed, much of her poetry of the 1920s and 30s and her most well-known prose works—*Anarchism is Not Enough* (1928), *Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1928), *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1929), *The Telling* (1962; 1970), and *Rational Meaning* (1992)—revolve around the question of language and its relation to (the) truth, and these texts testify to what (Riding) Jackson saw as the inadequacy of poetry as truth-telling discourse. Perhaps because of this singular focus on truth and her ultimate “abdication” from the “office of poetry,” to use Robert Duncan’s phrase (“A Life in Poetry”), (Riding) Jackson has something of a marginal status in relation to official narratives of modernism. In spite of her connections in London literary circles in the 1920s and 1930s, Wallace suggests that this is a result, at least in part, of (Riding) Jackson’s own reluctance to give up interpretive control of her texts—the truth she saw extant in her texts that was somehow lost in its transmission to readers and critics (112). In response to this singularity and difficulty, which is also an opportunity, this chapter aims to unravel some of the complexities of (Riding) Jackson’s politics of language, truth and self-portraiture, the ways her texts encourage and discourage finalized meaning-making and identification, the ways they open up and preclude possible plenitudes, the ways (Riding) Jackson’s own writerly identity—that is, the identity she projects in her texts—slips and gains purchase in poetry and in poetic language. Put another way, I am examining (Riding) Jackson’s address to “truth” throughout her work not as a route to veracity and authenticity but as a throughline for her work along which we can recognize fissures, gaps, and elisions.

My dual focus here—on (Riding) Jackson’s “abdication” and on her obsession with truth—will serve as a way to think through the consistencies, discontinuities, and indeed the development of (Riding) Jackson’s thought and work, and to think through the contradictions that inhere to an “identity of opposites” that speaks that “truth.” Objectively measuring the subject and the confirming some objective “Truth” are beyond and beside my purpose here. In contrast to the scholarly work on (Riding) Jackson, then, what is more important for my thinking in this chapter is what the pursuit of these abstractions—and the written self required to engage in such a pursuit—indicates about the direction of (Riding) Jackson’s aesthetic politics.

(Riding) Jackson’s work is perhaps the most demonstrably dialectical of all the writers this dissertation has thus far addressed—in the classic, Hegelian tradition of the oppositional triad, ostensibly resolved by a synthesis of opposing terms. Yet, by virtue of a series of stylistic features, made more stark over time, (Riding) Jackson’s writing also highlights the irresolvability of the fundamental political question of Benjamin’s late critical work: how does one reckon with and articulate the relation between a present subject putting to text a past/passed object, without falling into truisms about “repeating the past” or into pernicious retellings of triumphalist history? The answer for (Riding) Jackson—and indeed for each of the writers under consideration in this dissertation—is oscillation, and the undermining of ideological foundations that it provides. This dialectical movement can be found, provisionally, in the textual production of ambiguities, of a movement between oppositions temporarily frozen in place by language before the oscillation begins again. As I will explore below, the two most prominent oscillations in (Riding) Jackson’s work is that between self and history (as a temporal boundary) and between materiality and abstraction (as enacted or

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55 This phrase is drawn from (Riding) Jackson’s “Letter of Abdication” in Anarchism is Not Enough (1928), and as I will explore below, it is a useful stand-in for the (non)self (Riding) Jackson works to articulate in her work—a writerly subjectivity that opposes what she calls the “muddle” of her bourgeois social context.
obscured in language). As an inaugural example, take (Riding) Jackson’s meditation on “the Past” in *The Telling*, her most fully-realized philosophical work of her later career, where she presents a series of claims fraught with a contradiction between the speaking subject and the language with which she speaks:

> And there is no going back: the Past of us is used. The half-world of our half-progress towards full selfhood (self-being touched with the touch of One) is being consumed in the war of its contradictions. Its half-words, with their meanings both double and divided, are destroying one another; and all that we call one ‘consent’ is a chaos of spoken incommunication. There is nothing left to us but to be sufficient to one another in our human need to pay to Being the debt of ourselves, that will enrich it with its Oneness, restoration. All else has proved itself false—the difference between the insufficient and false fading as the insufficient fades. There is nothing left to us but to speak in the pure language of this need—to speak only truth. (53)

What (Riding) Jackson *seems* to be offering here is a path forward, one that rejects the past as “used,” as part of a “half-progress towards full selfhood” that has been “consumed in the war of contradictions.” But what it offers is itself a contradiction, a “Oneness” that somehow contains the collective, representing or speaking for “us.” The endpoint is “pure language” that “speak[s] only truth”—an atemporal idealism in language that works towards articulating an atemporal and ideal truth. It is not clear in this passage how or why “the insufficient fades” and leaves “only truth” in its wake. (Riding) Jackson’s is a vague teleology, an exact and exacting invocation of a utopian realm of truthfulness that nonetheless has blurry edges, an uncertain provenance. If “Being” or “Oneness” is an ontological state that seems to be both within us and beyond us, how does one go about realizing it? What allows us to “be sufficient to one another,” to induce this subsumption of the one to the many? Rather than answer these questions directly, (Riding) Jackson simply identifies the path forward, a time yet-to-come, that—unlike Benjamin’s Angel of History—refuses to look backward. Initially dialectical, here, (Riding) Jackson proceeds by the negative, by clearing space (“there is no going back”; “there is nothing left to us”; “[a]ll else has proved itself false”) but, undialectically, she
neglects to deliver the outcome, the image/metaphor/structure that would sublate, mediate, resolve the problematic she outlines.

Instead, each proposition in The Telling—and, indeed, throughout (Riding) Jackson’s corpus—works across oppositions (individual/community; inside/outside; subject/object; poetry/science; materiality/abstraction; and so on), refuting and rejecting one side and then the other side, or combining them in an oscillation that is suggestive of completion while never fully satisfying it. A Benjaminian reading of the movement of (Riding) Jackson’s language suggests that these dialectical exercises almost invariably orient towards “truth” as a home, site, transition point, breeding ground, goal for the proceedings. On this level, (Riding) Jackson’s repeated tracing over of “truth” is in alignment with Stein’s notion of “insistence” as examined in Chapter 3: the repetition of phrases and words in different contexts and constructions, building an incremental patterning that narrates otherwise, that discards beginning-middle-end as readily as it does thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Instead, (Riding) Jackson’s obsessive reiteration counterposes an overarching teleology of truthfulness that we might otherwise see in her work. What makes this pursuit oscillate, what makes (Riding) Jackson’s dialectic materialist rather than an Hegelian idealism, is the act of telling, a recitation and presentation akin to Benjamin’s preference for “showing” over “saying”; as Benjamin avers in “Konvolut N,”

I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse-these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (460)

As I discuss in Chapter 1, there is a productive contradiction in the act of presenting that which “is”—that the critic/thinker/poet participates in the presentation, even if they

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56 As I explore in Chapter 3, Stein works similarly across oppositions in History or Messages from History, using the word “history” as a fulcrum point for her explorations.
posit an objectivity. And, importantly, language is the vehicle by which the critic/thinker/poet participates: this is what Benjamin means by “making use” of “the rags, the refuse.” But it is not an “inventory” governed by received models of thinking. I would argue that Benjamin’s writing subject in his critical method is analogous to (Riding) Jackson’s utopian sense of “pure language” above—a passive activity or an active passivity that posits an objective “truth” in an external force. For Benjamin, that force is discarded history, found and activated by the self in the juxtaposition of fragmentary documents; for (Riding) Jackson, that force is an unwavering faith in language itself as the site of being and knowledge that, through 

This faith in language wavers under the weight of (Riding) Jackson’s actual tellings. Indeed, an examination of (Riding) Jackson’s prose style helps to tease out the complexities of her linguistic theories and her strategies of self-representation throughout her corpus because it stages the tension of an oscillating dialectic. (Riding) Jackson’s sense of (the) truth seems to come from the act of allowing words to “come into their own”—proceeding from the assumption that the right language will avoid personal bias and speak to that greater, non-subjective truth. But she complicates this assumption by moving in her earlier work towards an irreducibly autonomous individualism and in her later work towards a universalized collectivity—both of which assume an agent (or agents) that stands in opposition to the social world. The grammatical construction of 

The grammatical construction of \textit{telling} underscores its ambiguity: as a verb plus gerund, telling implies action while functioning grammatically as a noun (“the” telling, “a”
telling).\textsuperscript{57} Telling imbricates action and product, subject and object, and opens up the possibility of saying something “new” \textit{and} of saying nothing at all. It is the textual enactment of what (Riding) Jackson calls much earlier in \textit{Anarchism is Not Enough} [1928] the “identity of opposites” (214)—a writerly identity that seeks to find the language that will allow her to position herself in opposition to the catastrophe of history. In (Riding) Jackson’s case, it is a catastrophe of what she dubs before her hiatus the “muddle,” a catastrophe of officialised discourse, of the professions, finally of the loss of a “true” language. Telling in (Riding) Jackson’s configuration describes and answers these problematics with a critical orientation, a skepticism that overturns received hierarchies and social systems, opening up ground for critique. At the level of strategy—how one responds to political unrest and ideological fakery—the form of (Riding) Jackson’s telling offers a philosophical discourse, a language, for Benjamin’s silenced Angel of History to speak.

As a way to think through this proposition, this chapter will work in reverse chronological order—to look back, as Benjamin’s Angel of History does, at the detritus of (Riding) Jackson’s long writing career, focusing in particular on her self-representation as critic. It will begin with \textit{The Telling}, the text most aligned with Benjamin’s orientation towards the historical and the political (framed in the language of apocalypse), as a productive elaboration of (Riding) Jackson’s sense of history and its fraught relation to truth in language and to officialized culture and cultural institutions. What we see playing out in the oscillating language of \textit{The Telling} is a dismissal of history as a deliverer of top-down power structures and a positing of language as an \textit{ur}-history that somehow contains the originary truth of human communication. Indeed, the nature of linguistic interaction—its political valences—preoccupies (Riding) Jackson in \textit{The Telling}.

\textsuperscript{57} It is the most productive example of (Riding) Jackson’s tendency to turn verbs into nouns and related to her movement in her late writing toward creating German-style compound words to encapsulate complex abstractions.
To examine the seeds of this preoccupation with the complexities of identity and communication, a closer look at one of (Riding) Jackson’s preferred genres, the letter, is in order: *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* and the “Letter of Abdication” from *Anarchism is Not Enough*. The dialectic of address in a letter—its construction of an ideal reader and its rejection of ill-suited or self-centred readership, which through synthesis seems to posit an austere and powerful letter-writing subject—serves (Riding) Jackson as a way to articulate a writerly identity without defining it, without limiting the possibilities of expression and the writer’s access to that elusive language of truth. Finally, by way of conclusion, this chapter will examine a “fable” from *Experts Are Puzzled* (1920), an early text that serves as a productive allegory for (Riding) Jackson’s political engagement with form and language. What each and all of these linguistic experiments demonstrate is a Laura (Riding) Jackson that imagines “uninfected” language as the site of an oppositional stance against received systems of thought and power, a careful yet forceful articulation of a writer opposed to the atrocities of the “muddle” of the bourgeois social world—imprecision, complacency, ignorance—and working tirelessly and impatiently to tell us truth even as she avoids *the* truth.

Importantly, (Riding) Jackson’s “truth”—a notion that must always dwell within quotation marks in this dissertation—is a text, no more and no less; it is another pose, another mask among the myriad *persona* of modernism. What is worth examining is the oscillations it sets in motion in its propositions, and what these movements suggest about (Riding) Jackson’s self-construction and what that might suggests about the challenge of reckoning with and representing modernity. Throughout her texts, (Riding) Jackson seems to claim that language is somehow outside of history. It is the inverse position to Benjamin (and Stein, as I suggest in Chapter 3) who posits history as *only* language. So rather than “churn” the ground upon which she stands, as Benjamin’s archaeologist does, (Riding) Jackson’s writerly self seems to seek new ground beyond or outside of history. What is noteworthy is that the technique is the same (oscillating
ambiguities), as is the target (received ideology). Where Benjamin charges after the ignored and buried past, (Riding) Jackson chooses asociality—through a rejection of officialized culture and of the “muddle”—a critical orientation that rejects the products of human culture (past or present, “barbarous” or otherwise) for a universal human language beyond that culture. Instead, (Riding) Jackson offers speaking as a revolutionary act that oscillates paradoxically between individual agents and universal forces. And a precisely defined and then enacted language—a “telling”—becomes the versatile intermediary of this contradiction. An examination of her texts suggests that this position can be read simultaneously as a pose and as a genuine desire for a “new” subject position from which to speak (the) “truth.” There is nonetheless a way to align Benjamin’s materialist historian with (Riding) Jackson’s “identity of opposites” (Anarchism 214), to see them both as oscillating Angels: if Benjamin’s Angel “must look” at the catastrophe of history—that is, he cannot but see it as catastrophe, and he is forced to see it because of the winds of progress—(Riding) Jackson’s Angel must tell what she sees, having her wings forced open by the weight of (self)history even as she fights against those expectations. However, where Benjamin gives us image, (Riding) Jackson gives us language.

“There is something to be told” but “there is no going back”: Dialectical Agency in The Telling

The Telling begins with an implied promise which the text (necessarily) avoids fulfilling: “There is something to be told about us for the telling of which we all wait” (338). First published in Chelsea magazine in 1967, her first major text in nearly three decades, (Riding) Jackson’s The Telling constructs the past as a part of the material world to be rejected, shunted aside, bracketed out—in favour of a utopic, egalitarian future where collective truth is told by each language-user, where no contradiction is found between past and present, between self and Other. Note the way that “something” above is “to
be told," the speaker removed grammatically, the adequate subject position a yet-to-come linked inexorably to the telling itself. We are, perhaps, in the realm again of Walter Benjamin’s “messianic time,” when after the breaking of “homogenous, empty time,” the Angel of History is able to speak—and revolution becomes possible. In (Riding) Jackson’s conception, however, it is not a return of the old, not a “tiger’s leap” into the past, but an asocial, uncompromised leap beyond. Indeed, there is in (Riding) Jackson’s text something of a transcendentalism, but it is an amateriality that targets “hard” materialist sciences, without destroying the legitimacy they lend: in the “Nonce Preface,” (Riding) Jackson calls The Telling a “personal evangel” (1), while at the same time she “check[s]” The Telling for “nonsense” and thereby aligns it, somehow, with “scientific criticism” (3-4). In this way, she presents the text as a scientific experiment in spiritual utterance—allowing for no sense of contradiction between the two. For readers of the text, though, what is left “to be told” is how precisely these seemingly competing tensions of temporality and epistemology can produce the conditions “for the telling of which we all wait,” the telling, in short, of truth—a truth (Riding) Jackson imagined to be irrevocably severed from the social world. But how can that be so; how can truth be “told,” but told asocially? As with Benjamin’s late writing—where idealism is yoked to materialism, an oscillation productive of further tensions—the revolutionary and emancipatory orientation of (Riding) Jackson’s abstractions, the way telling plays across competing tensions in order to reveal and rupture current conditions and to open up space for “new” lived conditions through a renewal of language, returns this act of writing to the social world. Rather than survey the detritus of the past, however, (Riding) Jackson’s angel is future-facing, yet both the critical orientation and the hoped-for outcome are the same as what we find in Benjamin’s historiography.

As we will see with much of (Riding) Jackson’s earlier work, when she was known simply as Laura Riding and still identified as a poet, these are contradictions and questions not to be resolved but to be celebrated. The Telling is an ambitious text,
organized into a series of 62 paragraph-long meditations that, as (Riding) Jackson suggests in her “Preface for a Second Reading” of the text, “extends in subject across tremendous questions of existence and destiny” (59). The text makes broad claims about language, being, spirituality, philosophy, the “natural” (27), the body, story and myth, human intelligence—making a “count of our components” (36): mind, soul, spirit, matter, body. In the 55th section, (Riding) Jackson explains, “My subject is all ourselves, the human reality” (49). In addressing this totality, The Telling’s meditations move between metaphysical reflection, invoking spiritual and historical archetypes and referencing the broad sweep of human existence; pointed critique of social institutions, the professions, gender codes, and so on; and a bequeathing of responsibility and knowledge to the reader (usually referred to as “us” or “we”), who for (Riding) Jackson inhabits and is able to speak the “truth” of human existence. By design, there is no paraphrasable narrative or logical through-line for The Telling: each meditation is imbricated with and implicated in the preceding and subsequent section. As such, the text asks readers to dwell in the oscillations, to allow the form to work upon them without seeking a whole or an answer—even as (Riding) Jackson claims that she is addressing that totality.

Many of (Riding) Jackson’s readers have characterized The Telling as anomalous in her corpus, a less compelling departure from her poetry and criticism of the 1920s and 30s. By Barbara Adams’ estimation, the tone of “evangelism [in The Telling] mutes the swift intellectual acuity of Riding’s poetry, though its hypnotic prose cannot altogether conceal her poetic hand. It makes a poor substitute for her tough-minded poetry” (3). Ella Zohar Ophir diagnoses a lack of development from the poetry as the problem in the text when she claims that The Telling “is a product of the years after Riding had turned away from poetry, but the apocalyptic vision it articulates was first developed in her poetry and forms, I believe, its most significant limitation” (108). Either way, the poetry is awarded the preeminent position in the hierarchy—as the reference
point for a reading of *The Telling*’s rhetorical idiosyncrasies. These sorts of readings reveal a lamenting tone among (Riding) Jackson’s readers, a sense of regret about her decision to eschew poetry in favour of ever more precise and ever more esoteric honings of linguistic definition. However, as Ophir (113) and Carla Billiteri (100-101) have also suggested, (Riding) Jackson’s move to reject poetry was an inclusive one, pushing towards the idea that everyone and anyone can speak truth—and that *The Telling* represents an attempt to articulate that inclusivity in philosophical or spiritual terms. As Ophir claims,

> Riding’s decision to write no more poetry was a move toward inclusiveness. In *The Telling* she insists that every individual is equally called to strive toward the articulation of truth. Intellectual autonomy remains an imperative, but it is extended to everyone. Humanity’s will to truth (taken as axiomatic) is conceived, in a vaguely Hegelian way, as “being” coming into fully expressed consciousness of itself. Hence every individual’s devotion to the speaking of being will eventually converge with every other individual’s in an articulation of the indivisible whole, which is truth. (Ophir 112-113)

In addition to this pursuit of something like a universal spirit, (Riding) Jackson’s work in *The Telling* is indeed “vaguely Hegelian” in the same way Benjamin’s “dialectical image” is: as a methodology. The “truth” it may or may not express necessarily grows out of a complex interweaving of concerns and contradictions, a productive space for an examination, if necessarily incomplete, of oscillating dialectics of knowledge and “truth,” past and present, the individual and the collective.

> Importantly, though, this space never offers resolution or completion—simply more contradictions. Until, that is, the end of homogenous time, the end of progressive history, and the utopic beginning of what Benjamin calls “messianic time.” In order to achieve this, Benjamin explains,

> The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or [...] a revolutionary chance in the fight
This seeking after frozen moments from the past—to be “blasted” out of their temporal (and narrative) contexts, if only for a moment, in order to draw out their revolutionary potential—serves an emancipatory function for Benjamin: through negation, Benjamin’s historical materialist reveals the objective “truth” about an earlier social structure, its role as the bearer of a “homogenous time” that contains the triumphalist narratives of progressive history. A contradiction remains: “blasting” an historical object out of its context destroys it at the same time that it emancipates it. In The Telling, (Riding) Jackson returns those objects of the past to the collective, and she does so through abstraction, a removal of words from their “infected” social contexts. She seems to suggest the problem of language and truth, of representation, ends and begins with an unruly sort of collectivity. (Riding) Jackson is rather cagey in The Telling about how we should conceive of this collective: it does not appear to have a location, time, gender, and so on. This is another aspect of the abstraction involved. Instead, it seems that for (Riding) Jackson collectivity is housed in language itself, and in humanity, as languaged beings who have this “truth” between them in the act of “telling” themselves to one another. She concedes that any instantiation of truth in her text is temporary, processual:

But let me not be taken to think that I provide an explication sufficient to all-dispel the haze of mystery rising from, clinging to, my conceptions of how it was-and-is. (I myself feel a presence of mystery-haze even at my words’ best outspeiling of my meaning.) Whatever I say cannot of itself suffice: that which I may make clear will soon be clouded over, unless my saying is multiplied by other and other saying. (31)

(Riding) Jackson acknowledges the difficulty and opacity of her task, that “haze of mystery” that she cannot “all-dispel” on her own, and her necessary reliance on “other and other saying” to multiply her “explication” of truth. These “others” are never
defined in the text; rather, the collective “truth” to be told is assumed a priori. But, again, it necessarily is activated by the act of telling (or “saying,” here). Thus, precisely-articulated language in the moment is both the “dispel[ing]” of properly-told truth and the condition for its eventual “cloud[ing] over.” The utopic (read: non-contradictory) condition of language for (Riding) Jackson is collective and always in motion, an act that saturates the moment of “telling” with a deep temporality: the repetition required for her “meaning” to “all-dispel the haze of mystery” must come, unlike with Stein, in the utterances of “others”—so that the structure of each successful “telling” necessitates the yet-to-come tellings of others.

It is clear that this utopia requires a break both from received ways of “telling” and from traditional constructions of time; it also requires what (Riding) Jackson calls in the “Outline” to The Telling an “alternative self”—an oppositional identity that works against the “self-claiming self” that dominates poetry in particular but also language use more generally (6). (Riding) Jackson continues,

_There is an alternative [to the “self-claiming self”] self, a human-souled being, a self conscious of ourselves who bear in manifold individualness, each singly, the burden of the single sense of the manifold totality. This self its [sic] implicated in the totality as a speaking self of it, owing it words that will put the seal of the Whole upon it._ (6)

For (Riding) Jackson in The Telling, identity (“Self”) and truth are coextensive—expressed, as Barbara Adams points out, as a Oneness not unlike the ontology of the Transcendentalists (103), though (Riding) Jackson’s utopic impulse towards community, rather than solitude, complicates this analogy. However, though the truth (or “the Whole”) is held within each “self,” in (Riding) Jackson’s conception, this self is also “of” the “totality.” Indeed, throughout The Telling, (Riding) Jackson plays one side of the divide against the other, so that the Whole and the (properly conceived) self are simultaneously incompatible and self-identical. Following from my expansion of Benjamin’s dialectical method in Chapter 1, perhaps we could suggest that meaning
oscillates between these possibilities—waiting, in this case, for “other and other saying.” (Riding) Jackson’s oscillation between identification with and total rejection of the social collective—along with an agency of telling that is also an abdication, an avoidance of “self-claiming” and a waiting for others to speak—points to a seeking after an “alternative” being in language, a utopic future where a “Whole” might be realized.

In Being Singular-Plural, Jean-Luc Nancy offers a terminology that helps in thinking through the oscillation of self and Other involved in (Riding) Jackson’s self-construction. Examining the foundations of human interconnectivity as opposed to the notion of singular subjectivity—which he sees as “a contradiction in terms” (12)—Nancy posits “the with” as the most effective way to think through what (Riding) Jackson calls above “the manifold totality”; he argues,

Being-many-together is the originary situation; it is even what defines a “situation” in general. Therefore, an originary or transcendental “with” demands, with a palpable urgency, to be disentangled and articulated for itself. But one of the greatest difficulties of the concept of the with is that there is no “getting back to” or “up to” [remonter] this “originary” or “transcendental” position; the with is strictly contemporaneous with all existence, as it is with all thinking. (41)

For Nancy, “the with” is an unending oscillation between the self and the Other. In the movement of his language, he makes a preposition into a concept or “situation.” The subject this language works to project continuously moves among the singular and the plural, is defined—both limited and articulated—by her or his singular-plurality. Like (Riding) Jackson’s telling, Nancy’s with requires a heretofore unseen language and conceptualization, an abstract thinking beyond that is also profoundly “contemporaneous,” in the present moment, though saturated with a sense of the “origins” of human “existence” and connectivity.

Indeed, in another revision of Transcendentalism, (Riding) Jackson sees what she calls above the “Whole” as timeless. Rather than routes towards or sources for the
provisional truth/identity contained ultimately in language, narrative forms of history and memory are for (Riding) Jackson hindrances or veils over what she sees as the primal and ultimately atemporal origins of human community—the shared fact of human language. These officialized narratives are tools for the “self-claiming self” she rejects in the “Outline.” Two early passages from the text highlight the inextricable relation between the “true” self and “true” language. (Riding) Jackson both connects and distinguishes between memory and history in The Telling—seeing history as a deformation or a continuation of memory, depending on the valences of a particular mode of memory-recollection. In the twenty-second section, (Riding) Jackson declares,

In every human being there is secreted a memory of a before-onceself; and, if one opens the memory, and the mind is enlarged with it, one knows a time which might be now, by one’s feelings of being somehow of it. In describing the memory, I refer to what I find in me that belongs to me not in my simple present personhood but in my intricate personless identity with all that has preceded me to the farthest, timeless reach of not-me. A like identity has each of us, reclaimable by the mind in memory-form: I think I do not present a private fancy, with the declared more-than-ancient thing of memory, rather a common potentiality of imagining back to the all-antecedent reality. I believe there is a vestige of the Before in the Now that each bears as an individual mark, but that is, yet, the same mark, the same memory. (25)

This sort of memory, one that captures “all-antecedent reality,” is elusive because it has “preceded me to the farthest, timeless reach of not-me” yet one can still have the “feeling of being somehow of it.” And the act of telling brings this atemporal “beyond” to the present moment, so that “there is a vestige of the Before in the Now.” In spite of her claim that this is not a “private fancy,” (Riding) Jackson’s diction, and her abstracting

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58 In this notion of an “all-antecedent reality,” one can perhaps identify in (Riding) Jackson a sense, after Noam Chomsky, of a shared human genetic predisposition towards language—a sense of linguistic hard-wiring in the brain. However, (Riding) Jackson imagines her own position as opposed to Chomsky’s; indeed, she claims in an essay in Rational Meaning that Chomsky’s work amounts to “an academic murdering of the realities of language” because it ignores what is “implicitly present in the words by how they mean” (“The New Grammar” 528).
of abstractions, are perhaps impossible to paraphrase, and at times, her meaning—the truth she is always seeking—seems rather “clouded over,” covered in a “mystery haze.” Indeed, what precisely is an “intricate personless identity”? Or how might one identify a “mind in memory-form” rather than in some other form? There is, however, a clearly articulated target, both in the sense of a goal to aim for and in the sense of an enemy to be targeted. Like Mansfield does throughout her New Zealand stories, (Riding) Jackson is attempting to redefine memory as a route to innovative self-construction—or more consciously, she is working to rediscover the immanent, “all-antecedent” meaning for memory. And, as part of recalibrating “memory” as a knowledge both preceding and beyond the individual and individualized self—though still recognizable to and contained in her—(Riding) Jackson pursues identifying the “mark” all memory bears of this transcendental “before” that is also an “always.”

The difficulty of the passage, as with many passages in The Telling, is (Riding) Jackson’s attempt to dramatize through telling the contradiction inherent in the abstractions she explores and re-defineds. How can memory be both a marker of the past and a bearer of all pastness itself? How can language construct this simultaneity? What “individual mark” will suffice? When Benjamin describes the “cautious probing” of the archaeologist in his autobiographical Berlin Chronicle, he frames the process as follows: “[M]emory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater” (25). As I suggest in Chapter 1, for Benjamin the act of “churning” the past is tantamount to self-destruction—but it is also a critique of the very ground upon which memory is built: language. Viewed from this standpoint, the act of digging up memories can reveal both something about the “Now” (in the act of “churning”) and about the “Then” it contains (the “theater” for both our past and our present selves). This is the temporal depth Benjamin calls in his “theses” on history “now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time” (397)—where he indicates that a single complex moment, one that contains past and present simultaneously, can blast the self and his or her language out
of their inurement in an oppressive present. This is the political possibility, that of revolution, inherent in the metaphysical meanderings we encounter in *The Telling*.

For (Riding) Jackson, further, “memory” presented idiosyncratically and abstractly functions as something of a placeholder, a ground (or “theater”) from which to launch a critique against history and poetry—neither of which seem to be salvageable in her nomenclature, precisely because they hew so close to her expressed goal, truth, without achieving it. By (Riding) Jackson’s estimation, history and poetry are not truth because they are part of the “truth-telling professions” (*The Telling* 339), part of an irreversible process of professionalization and self-justification that bastardize “pure” memory (and pure “truth”). In the sixth section of *The Telling*, (Riding) Jackson begins her analysis with an alignment and then a dismissal of history and poetry; she argues,

The weakness of history is that it begins late and ends early. It has neither old nor new to tell, but all is diminished in it to make the brief time of our learning that we are “human” (without yet learning what it is to be that) seem half of eternity. Poetry leaves us otherwise lacking. The future-facing truth-telling that it promises our ears and imaginations never breaks forth from the tellers: the telling travels round and round the tellers in standstill coils, a bemusement in which tellers and listeners are lost. Teller, listener, story, become in poetry one bemusement, in which present and future seem to commingle, and the desire to tell truth and the need to hear it shrink from the touch of fulfilment in lazy unison. Poetry’s numbered wording abbreviates truth to the measure of mortal premonition, which has but midnight’s reach. Poetry is a sleep-maker for that which sits up late in us listening for the footfall of the future on today’s doorstep. (11)

Here, (Riding) Jackson is critiquing history and poetry for faulty synthesis, for the wrong abstractions. History, she suggests, traps us in a sort of “small case” now, the present time of an ultimately unfulfilled human identification, a pursuit that ignores the broad sweep of time—what she will call later “all-antecedent”; instead, history favours “the brief time” (expressly not that “half an eternity” it might seem to contain) of humanity’s arrival on the scene. And if professionalized history has the wrong target, poetry takes
the wrong forms to express that inconsequential subject matter. We are “bemused” rather than enlightened by poetry, it seems, and in language that Joyce Piell Wexler observes is “more figurative than most of her poetry” (154), (Riding) Jackson informs us that the focus on humanity and on mortality stoppers our ears from “the future on today’s doorstep.” The message aligns with (Riding) Jackson’s recalibration of memory later on in The Telling: as above, the “lazy unison” posited between the human “desire to tell truth” and its imperfect fulfillment, leading to the “shrink[ing]” of that desire, suggests a limited access to a clearly differentiated “future”—to a future that doesn’t “commingle” with the present by creating that muddled, lower-case now. In other words, she suggest that we are caught in a cycle of presentist “laziness” that precludes a “future-facing truth telling.” (Riding) Jackson’s diagnosis of the sellout of professionalized categories like history and poetry can be summarized as follows: they limit the linguistic choices of the tellers of truth, who stand somehow outside and beyond the conventional bounds of time, memory, history. For (Riding) Jackson it is limited, sloppy, social forms of language that leave us at a standstill because they are ideological; that is, they interrupt the process of truth-telling and do not allow for “other and other saying.” We are lulled to sleep by poetry, unable to react, to move, to see and speak to that which is beyond—the “footfall of the future.” This position both marks a distinction and aligns with (Riding) Jackson’s claim in 1928 that “Poetry is perhaps the only pursuit left still capable of developing anti-socially” (Contemporaries and Snobs 32). Prior to her abdication, (Riding) Jackson posited that poetry could develop into something more than another “sleepmaker”; by 1970 that hope had withered. What is discernable across these years, though, is the “pursuit” of a space, a temporality, and a language outside of the social world.

Paradoxically, then, (Riding) Jackson critiques the present form of human sociality—“bemusement” from a “sleep-maker” proffering pernicious social categories that limit access to broader truth—to point us towards a universal human collectivity
housed instead in redefined but not discarded abstractions: memory, truth, language, the future. And herein lies (Riding) Jackson’s politics, though they are hidden behind a tissue of abstractions: social legitimation of asocial human knowledge—pursued most persuasively and therefore most unethically by historians and poets—is for (Riding) Jackson an enactment of power over human minds, disallowing the spiritual connection one might gain from a (carefully and precisely) broadened sense of memory and truth. It is a politics of sustained critique and withheld action—akin to Benjamin’s “barge pole” brushing history “against the grain” to see what barbarousness is revealed. In her “Preface for a Second Reading” appended to the 1972 publication of *The Telling*, (Riding) Jackson identifies the “making of a poem” as a false choice:

To a poet the mere making of a poem can seem to solve the problem of truth, which in other wisdom-professions is acknowledged to be a toilsome one. But only a problem of art is solved in poetry. Art, whose honesty must work through artifice, cannot avoid cheating truth. Poetic art cheats truth to further and finer degrees than art of any other kind because the spoken word is its exclusive medium; the product, reaching minds at instant quickness, scarcely leaves time for questioning of its entitlement to welcome as truth-natured utterance—as the very actuality, truth natural. (67)

Carla Billitteri has helpfully and insightfully identified this standpoint as a version of Cratylicism—a movement beyond Plato’s idealist sense of language as pale imitation of the world of forms to a commitment to “natural” language as the source of truth and renewal—that articulates the philological shift behind (Riding) Jackson’s decision to abdicate from poetry (87). In a sense, then, we can see that (Riding) Jackson is offering here a critique of “art for art’s sake”—a movement Benjamin links to fascist politics in the artwork essay: in parallel to the propagandist’s “aestheticization of political life” (“Reproducibility” 121), the poet offers a solution to “a problem of art” and thereby “cheats truth.” And, like *l’art pour l’art*, because “the spoken word is its exclusive medium,” poetry as (Riding) Jackson conceives of it, silences any “questioning of its entitlement”; it is, in other words, uncritical, unreflective, productive of further lies and
misrepresentations. But while Benjamin in the artwork essay maintains a measure of hope in the emancipatory potential of technologized forms of art—a new medium offering the chance for “politiciz[ing] art” (241)—(Riding) Jackson sees a two-pronged perniciousness that can only be counterproductive: poetry reproduces untruthful artifice while simultaneously presenting itself as truth-telling utterance. For (Riding) Jackson, the repercussions of this dishonesty reverberate across time, space, and language, and I would suggest, have a powerful bearing on the ideological orientations produced by professionalized discourses. As I explore below, they also prepare a context for us to identify the kind of writerly identity—“barge-pole” in hand—that (Riding) Jackson articulates and differentiates in her earlier letters.

If the “wisdom-professions,” because they are too inured in the navel-gazing of professionalized knowledge production, merely reproduce social categories and their concomitant falsehoods, in The Telling the layperson—the “natural,” untrained human ear and voice, the one who has that “intricate personless identity”—becomes (Riding) Jackson’s site of resistance, emancipation and action. Paradoxically—or, as I would argue, dialectically—she presents herself in the “Preface” as a sole voice able to tell this particular truth:

I have tried, in The Telling, to speak hearing the unbroken rhythm of the World’s time, and feeling in my words the accents of an immediacy intuitively comprehensive of the yet not wholly experienced whole of the Event. I present as our real time a now that has all that had made, and makes, Event, and will make it, in human view—that exposes to us, for learning, the entirety of our being. (“Preface for a Second Reading” 77)

(Riding) Jackson collapses all past, present, and future action into the “real time” of the “now” as she adumbrates it—not the “now” of humanity’s arrival but the “unbroken rhythm of the World’s time.” I want to return, here, to two frames for reading (Riding) Jackson’s self-presentation in this passage: 1) Benjamin’s “now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time,” a time after the revolution (“the Event”) that is full of “all that had made, and makes [...] and will make it”; and 2) Nancy’s singular-plural “with,”
to the teller’s singularity marked by plurality. Utilizing her highly attuned ear for this “rhythm,” (Riding) Jackson “present[s]” this “immediacy” and thereby creates an access point to a “wholly experienced whole of the Event”. This “speaking” is both ontologically and epistemologically contradictory, since it “exposes” the “entirety of our being,” but it posits a knowing subject that can hear and give body to that comprehensive understanding. This truth is presented “for learning,” but (Riding) Jackson is careful to collectivize: the “whole of the Event” is “expose[d] to us”; we are “learning” together how to tell and how to hear that telling. But there is here, as throughout (Riding) Jackson’s writing, an “I” that is doing the “presenting”—and there is seldom if ever another specific person, identity, subjectivity besides (Riding) Jackson that can articulate this “experienced whole” and can thereby inaugurate the revolution. Indeed, poets and historians—those perhaps best suited and well equipped for the job—earn nothing but scorn from her pen. To an extent, (Riding) Jackson manages to avoid those same critiques by positing a singular-plural self, to use Nancy’s terminology, one that manages to hold on to the most useful language of the “wisdom professions” without succumbing to the socialized individualism that infects them. Ultimately, (Riding) Jackson’s thoroughly ambiguous positioning of her own writerly agency dramatizes a kind of Hegelian synthesis: “telling” in this construction oscillates (or mediates?) between appearance and essence, between representation and presentation, between the “lie” of language spewed forth by an individual and the truth of collective experience. In *The Telling* (Riding) Jackson stages what she sees as the necessarily partial and indeed failed *act* of writing on these interstices—and on those between past and present, between truth and falsehood—an act that both articulates and enacts a counterideological politics. In other words, *The Telling* fails to tell (Riding) Jackson’s “truth” entirely—and in that incompletion the text demonstrates the problem of truth-telling in language: we don’t yet have the words, properly refined and purified, to express our non-contradiction, our part in the human collective—“the entirety of our being.” At best, we have individual words telling the contradictions of individuality. Through the (failed)
form of *The Telling*, then, (Riding) Jackson rejects the presumed resolutions of progressive history and homogenous time and instead seeks to intensify the oscillations of extant language, to push language and time to the brink—or even to push beyond that barrier. Once that revolutionary language of singular-plurality is discovered, a new emancipated social reality—what Benjamin calls “messianic time”—can be created.

“flurrying” Letters of Abdication: The Identity of Opposites vs. The Muddle

First published in 1967, *The Telling* is in certain respects a culmination of (Riding) Jackson’s earlier explorations of truth, agency, and identity, from a time when she still identified as “poet.” However, as my examination of (Riding) Jackson’s self-construction in *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* (1930) and *Anarchism is Not Enough* (1928) below will explore, tracing this writer’s intellectual development is more complicated than following a simple trajectory. Indeed, by reversing the chronology in this chapter and examining *The Telling* first, I am working to unseat not only the received orthodoxy about (Riding) Jackson’s abandonment of her craft—my use of parenthetical nomenclature is similarly motivated—but also the market logic of development and progression, that “catastrophe” against which Benjamin’s Angel of History works. In this way, (Riding) Jackson’s later writing is also simultaneous with her earlier work; her identities, her claims, her “truths” sit uncomfortably but productively along and beside one another. This chapter, then, is an attempt to traverse the real and perceived gap between Riding as poet and (Riding) Jackson as philosopher. In its critique of the historical, too, *The Telling* projects a broad sweep of time—geological time, we might call it—and does not differentiate past, present, and future as separate and comparable entities, that sees them as “contemporaneous.” They exist, in other words, in both isolation (as words) and oscillation (as concepts), in a space somehow wholly outside of the social world and outside of what Benjamin calls “homogenous time.” The
abstraction fundamental to all of these counterintuitive, non-commonsensical choices, both my own and (Riding) Jackson’s, doesn’t preclude precision, however. As she contends in a 1935 essay in *Epilogue*,

> Ideas, though elements of thought, whose function it is to discover truth, pervert truth in expressing it; the sum of ideas is not wisdom but confusion. Ideas can be only historically true, by their subservience to historical ends. We must be aware of these ends in defining ideas, for it is as agents of history, not of truth, that they have reality: as agents of truth they have an equivocal reality. Thus we can clarify a standard of reality—by making thought seek its level in the range from historical to absolute reality (“Preliminaries” 1)

To use the language of my epigraph—which is also the epigraph to each issue of *Epilogue*—for (Riding) Jackson all ideas are “infected” and trapped in “historied reverie”; indeed, we are not wise but rather confused by the seeming truths of the “historically true,” which have a merely “equivocal reality.” The critic, which Riding again constructs in the form of the we, endeavours to “[make] thought seek its level.” This “flurrying curtain-fall,” a paradoxical image of both movement (“flurrying”) and stasis (the curtain drops, the show is over), awakens us and produces clarity, putting everything in its objective place, whether “historical” or “absolute.” The suggestion here is that “ideas” when they are expressed are more often than not misleading and pernicious, but only because of the use to which they’re put. Properly framed by the “aware” critic, all knowledge can be “absolute” rather than “equivocal,” even when the truth being sought traverses the pitfalls of the broad sweep of time and history.

What (Riding) Jackson argues for throughout her corpus is the possibility of a precision earned through ambiguity, so that one might be able to find a language adequate to the “telling” of massive and seemingly impossible “Ideas” (the nature of time, human ontology, truth), without recourse to the received wisdom of the “professions.” As we have seen, in *The Telling* (Riding) Jackson uses carefully paradoxical abstractions yet holds on to a measure of the sureness we can see in *Epilogue* of her
critic’s self. This oscillating subject position—one that simultaneously hears and expresses the true—grants “agency” and “reality” to the critic because of irresolvable contradictions that seem to combine into a synthesis (“absolute” “truth”) without quite getting there. This subject position is akin to Benjamin’s historical materialist who “grasps” [erfasst] objects from the past. As I examine in Chapter 3, erfasst is an act that oscillates between grasping and recording, between understanding and textualizing what one perceives, an act that stages a complex and ultimately irresolvable writerly identity, one that is both part of and separate from her or his subject matter. 59 Like Benjamin and Stein, then, (Riding) Jackson articulates abstract absolutes through unsolved paradoxes—which puts her in the awkward position of making seemingly contradictory, even self-negating, claims. By drilling down into The Telling’s temporal and linguistic depth, and by thinking of absolute truths as somehow both enduring (because geological or “contemporaneous”) and ephemeral (because expressed in language), we can begin to see the purpose of the linguistic shell game (Riding) Jackson seems to be playing.

In the latter half of The Telling, (Riding) Jackson acknowledges both her own and her reader’s difficulty with unchecked oscillation, especially the way it intensifies in her later writing:

Some, reading here, may know earlier efforts of mine to clear a way for the storytelling of us. Perhaps in those I seem more graceful, and to go

59 As I explore in detail in Chapter 3, Benjamin sets up his concept of “erfasst” as part of his discussion of the materialist historian’s opposition to narrativized history and its pernicious effects; he argues for an alternative conception of history and temporality—the “time of the now”:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus between various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like beads of a rosary. He grasps [erfasst] the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time. (“On the Concept of History” 397)
faster. I advanced then on the still wings of forevision of a time of telling true. Here I endeavor to advance into truth’s actual time, the measures and harmonies and very progress of which we must make as we go. There can be no thought of the manner of the going, in our moving to break out of physical time, a continuity of ever-dying repetitions of creation. (32)

The goal of (Riding) Jackson’s late work is clear—“to clear a way for the storying of us” by “advanc[ing] into truth’s actual time”—and it must proceed without methodological second-guessing. Certainly, style and accessibility does not and indeed cannot enter into the “endeavor.” Even though the critic does not engage in direct self-reflection because it will trap her in the “ever-dying repetitions of creation,” she does admonish (and, she hopes, train) her audience in the performance. (Riding) Jackson justifies her accusations in spatial terms:

I do not like it that I caution and counsel so much, here, rather than only tell my story of us. This is to speak louder than story-speaking, in which we are as in the same room with one another. It is as to cry at listeners across world-distance. But we are only a little, yet, as in the same room with one another—the room of our speaking at close ear to one another comes and goes. (43)

(Riding) Jackson sees and “tells” her “ideas” on the intersection of “truth’s actual time” and “world-distance,” yet somehow her “listeners” dwell in “the same room” as she does. She sets up a linguistic exchange which is simultaneously temporary and eternal, simultaneously local and global—a conversation both intensely private (“at close ear”) and unflinchingly public, a singular-plural identity of “the with”: “[M]y story of us.” And in each and all of these contexts, (Riding) Jackson sees herself as a voice that must forcefully and vociferously speak “truth” regardless of consequences. Critical agency (becoming an agent of truth rather than an “agent of history”) in this configuration is a lonely “cry” that can and must “clear the way” for that undisclosed truth The Telling purports to tell. In its oscillation between “caution[ing] and counsel[ing]” and “tell[ing] my story”—a seeking after an adequate form of expression and finding that an
inarticulate “cry” is the only recourse we have—we can perhaps detect (Riding) Jackson’s affinity with Mansfield’s “cry against corruption.”

(Riding) Jackson’s resort to “forevision of a time of telling true”—that post facto identification of the prescient underpinnings of her earlier work—ironically gives historical authority to her late work, implicitly mapping her work along a progressive trajectory and making her earlier texts “agents of history” (and indeed not agents of truth), to use her own nomenclature. These moments of acknowledgement, the admission that truth-telling as she imagines it requires her to “clear a way” for this new/old form of expression, offers a spatial dimension to the time of the “now” she works to clarify throughout the text. However, by granting agency to these earlier texts, (Riding) Jackson also opens up a fissure at the same stroke: these texts are by her estimation pointed in the right direction but inadequate to the task. They are not fully refined, not precise enough, but they do engage in an important aspect of telling: they show their own inurement in the “corruption” (to use Mansfield’s term) of progressive politics, even as they critique one or more aspects of that context. This is a formal equivalence for (Riding) Jackson; her earlier work does not seem to be telling the same “truth” as does The Telling, though as we have seen, the particulars of (Riding) Jackson’s late writing are difficult to discern because the act of writing itself emerges as the focal point and as the take away. In a link to Stein, we might say that the composition is the explanation. Indeed, both before and after her hiatus, (Riding) Jackson’s idealism is primarily a hardline formalism—a rejection of the meaningfulness of human-defined

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60 Mansfield describes her writerly motivations in a letter to Murry, set up a contrast—or what I argue in Chapter 2 is an oscillation—with the “joy” she registers as her first “kick-off”:

The other ‘kick-off’ is my old original one, and (had I not known love) it would have been my all. Not hate or destruction (both are beneath contempt as real motives) but an extremely deep sense of hopelessness, of everything doomed to disaster, almost wilfully, stupidly, like the almond tree and ‘pas de nougat pour le noel’ [O’Sullivan notes that this is a reference to a Henri Fabre poem]. There! as I took out a cigarette paper I got it exactly—a cry against corruption—that is absolutely the nail on the head. Not a protest—a cry, and I mean corruption in the widest sense of the word, of course. (107)
history (what we might more broadly call “content”) in favour of the movement of language across the expanse of geological time. (Riding) Jackson’s act of using language precisely—with the correct calibration of time and space—gestures towards the content of truth, but the movement of the gesture itself dramatizes that truth which is beyond the scope of the individual language-user. Again, this widened view is singular-plural, positing truth as belonging to an ahistorical human community, to others and Others to whom (Riding) Jackson unflinchingly listens. However, ultimately, by the end of her writing life, this “truth” is never clearly pinned down, though of course this ambiguity is productive in its own right.

What is most compelling in these attempts (both mine and hers) to articulate the what of (Riding) Jackson’s idealist formalism, I think, is the writerly identity (Riding) Jackson constructs, the subject position that a writer must occupy to tell these truths she hears. So while The Telling focuses our attention on the contradictory act of truth-telling, suggesting that truth in fact dwells on the interstices of these contradictions, Riding’s earlier writing directs us towards a broadly-conceived listener that becomes, through (Riding) Jackson’s projections, a writer to be “caution[ed]” and “counsel[ed]”. (Riding) Jackson’s preferred form for such an endeavour is the epistle, a genre that performs a communicative act but (because these texts are “unposted”) in fact floats outside the chain of signification. However, through their construction of audience (or target), Riding’s letters build paradoxically towards a complicated writerly identity: what she calls in Anarchism the “identity of opposites” (214). Her letter writer presumes authority and correctness a priori, and then exhorts the reader not only to see the world in the same abstract terms, but to participate in (Riding) Jackson’s forms of correct expression, as well. Hanging over all of (Riding) Jackson’s letters in this period is a distaste for what she calls in Unposted Letters to Catherine the “muddle,” and she continuously demands that her interlocutor reject this social milieu, but to do so from a particular vantage point. (Riding) Jackson’s recommended subject position dwells in a
space both of absolute certainty (in the negative, in unflinching rejection of that which is) and unresolved contradiction (between sender and receiver of language).

Consisting of polemical expositions on “Knowing,” “Doing,” “Learning,” and “History,” respectively, *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* is ostensibly addressed to Robert Graves’ eight-year-old daughter but gestures towards a broader, unnamed collective humanity. In its rhetorical flourishes, the tone of the text is condescending and presumptuous; at the same time, though, the letter-writing subject whom (Riding) Jackson constructs places a substantial onus of understanding on her reader. Billitteri suggests that (Riding) Jackson seems to explain “basic themes” in “simple language” (90), yet I would add that a discernible and paraphrasable “truth” is more difficult to derive from this simplicity. In the third letter—“To Discuss Learning”—(Riding) Jackson frames the problem to Catherine as follows:

This must all sound very complicated to you, dear Catherine, but naturally things sound complicated if you try to explain them, when the reason you are explaining them is that they ought to be simple but aren’t, having got so complicated as to need a complicated explanation to explain how simple they ought to be. (34)

This admission is immediately preceded by a seemingly self-negating ontological recommendation: “And if you can really be yourself, then everything can be as newly true as you are because of you—providing, of course, that being yourself comes so easily to you that you have a lot of being to give away” (34). (Riding) Jackson seems to be reframing the cliché—“be yourself”—in terms of exceptionality: the reader is “newly true,” and her “being” can be “give[n] away,” but only if ontological identification with this true self “comes […] easily.” Catherine’s youth is the fulcrum point, here; her relative innocence of the workings of the world (she is “new”) opens up the possibility for both a simple understanding of the world (a world that “ought to be simple”) and an incredulity at the fact that “things sound complicated” when they are explained. In (Riding) Jackson’s view, explanation and its accompanying rhetoric blurs our view of
what she sees as the fundamental simplicity of one’s timeless and natural state: it only “sounds complicated.”

These unnecessary complications, and the way (Riding) Jackson works to prepare her reader to unravel them, lead her to declare near the end of the final letter (“To Tell About the Muddle”) that “history” is “the most discouraging word that I know” (50). This is a not unsurprising judgment, considering (Riding) Jackson’s vitriol for the “wisdom professions” in *The Telling*, but she does not arrive at this conclusion via logical argumentation. The word “history”—and as ever, language is at the forefront of (Riding) Jackson’s concern in this text—is disappointing because it is an expression of the accumulated wrongs perpetrated by those who serve the system (the “muddle”). Rather than specify a particular social context, however, (Riding) Jackson here, as elsewhere, dwells in the realm of abstraction, and as I have argued above, this pursuit of abstraction is ever-turned towards the “messianic,” to use Benjamin’s term, towards revolution. On that front, though, her letter articulates the problematic of history (as thing, as concept, as word) from a much different angle of approach than she attempts in *The Telling*: rather than humankind’s misdirected sense of temporality, the problem is an inadequate understanding of and a weakness in the face of the workings of power. History, in this configuration, is the culmination of an inadequacy among the elites, and it is “discouraging” because it shows the wrongheadedness of those who wield power, the way they unstintingly serve the system by which they derive their power. Early on in the fourth letter, (Riding) Jackson offers a dramatization and a diagnosis of this problem:

Take, then, some person in charge of things. Perhaps you meet her one day, and she smiles, and does not say or do anything that bothers you, and you like her. And that’s quite all right. But now think of her at work in the muddle. She knows that things are in a muddle. She might even say that it was too bad that things were in a muddle. But she wouldn’t all the same work against the muddle. That is, she doesn’t particularly want to be straight because she’s not sure whether, if she were, she’d be anything in particular in an unmuddled state of things. She prefers to be an important though anyhow part of things anyhow. And so she goes to
work in the muddle, which is caused by people not being their simple selves but just anyhow parts of things anyhow. And she works cleverly and hard and enjoys herself and feels that she’s a great fellow. And so she is. And so the muddle goes on, getting more and more muddled. (37-8)

(Riding) Jackson’s narrative here reveals a number of the assumptions fundamental to her engagement with the social world, foremost of which is the notion that, always-already, “things are in a muddle,” and the individual subject must “be straight” and work against these unnecessary complications. And while for (Riding) Jackson the overarching structures of thought, and the material conditions they forge, are beyond repair, human nature (our “simple selves”) can be recaptured, though of course (Riding) Jackson avoids detailing how and when. However, even this formalistic possibility is foreclosed by the nature of power: this “person in charge of things,” even with the knowledge of the “muddle” and with the feeling that the current state of things is “too bad,” cannot but be complicit, in a system where complicity is rewarded with ontological validation (“she’s a great fellow”). This cycle of elitist back-patting “goes on,” making things “more and more muddled”—and this accumulation, in short, is “history,” that most “discouraging” of words.

But (Riding) Jackson’s parable of the elite here offers an out of sorts: individual disavowal—what she calls in Anarchism is Not Enough “abdication.” In order to “work against the muddle,” (Riding) Jackson tells us, one must “be straight.” Again, her rhetoric rejects the content of the “work,” rejects simply doing something, and homes in on the form of the subject (what one is, not what one does). The danger is that, without the system to prop up her subjecthood, this “person in charge of things” may well not “be anything in particular.” (Riding) Jackson presents this misdirected self as an integral part of a broader structure, an inurement in the system that is initiated by the unknowing, the unscrupulous:

But when things (people, say, this time) start out on their own and then don’t carry their job through because they have tackled a job bigger than
their size whether they would be sure to find others like them who were afraid of tackling their own-sized job alone; and of course stop on the way and of course get mixed up with the other people who stop on the way; then you have a really wrong muddle. And this muddle is a sort of stale nature because it is neither a beginning nor an end. It is history. (50)

By implication, this assessment suggests that the young, untouched, innocent reader—in her simplicity—is something in particular, can and indeed must rise above the “muddle” in order to break the cycle. In (Riding) Jackson’s work of this period, though, it is clear that she is not pushing for a change in the system, and in fact she counsels Catherine throughout Unposted Letters to move beyond or outside her milieu, to be “straight” rather than muddled. (Riding) Jackson avers, “The important thing is first to be straight yourself and to know a muddle when you come into contact with one, in order not to be drawn into it. Or, you might say, it is all one thing, being straight yourself and letting nothing interfere” (42); and then she clarifies the criteria for this simultaneous evaluation and rejection: “And by straight I mean straight not in comparison with the muddle that most people and the things connected with them are in, but straight by oneself, without thinking of anyone or anything else” (43). (Riding) Jackson’s writerly self imagines an outside, both for herself and for her reader—a space where essence and appearance are coextensive, and a space where the ability to read a social situation (to “know a muddle when you come into contact with one”) is inherent, essential, constitutive of the “straight” and unmuddled subject.

An earlier text that deals more directly with the role of art in the reproduction of the “muddle,” Anarchism is Not Enough, offers a productive complication to the “straight” self (Riding) Jackson calls for in Unposted Letters. Ever polemical, (Riding) Jackson lays out her central problematic—how to tell “truth” in language—in nearly all of her texts, and Anarchism is Not Enough frames politically her programmatic scepticism towards the “potentiality” of poetry to do the job, a scepticism that ends in an abdication of “the queen” (Anarchism 258). Indeed, even that ostensible political
commitment, to the social act of poetry as truth-teller and as anarchic force, is disavowed. The reader encounters in the text a confrontational, staunchly individualist and anti-representationalist poetic, a tissue of frustrating yet productive half-explanations and self-contradictions presented in short pieces of criticism with such titles as “What is a poem?” and “An Important Distinction” and in playful prose poems like “In a Café” and “An Anonymous Book.” The modular and disjunctive text is dominated in the middle by “Jocasta,” a long essay that articulates (Riding) Jackson’s strong scepticism towards what Samuels calls “systematic thinking” and “professionalized literary traditions” (xi-xii), and in many ways, points forward to the extended philosophical engagements of (Riding) Jackson’s writing after her renunciation of poetry. (Riding) Jackson’s alternative to received tradition, in a (possibly direct and intentional) form of response to T.S. Eliot’s impersonalized “Individual Talent,” as I discuss below, is a series of contradictions and paradoxes with no clear resolution. And this irresolvability is by design: as (Riding) Jackson tells us in her “Letter of Abdication” that closes the text, “[W]e are all in an impossible position; which you handle by making less, myself more, impossible” (211). (Riding) Jackson’s language here sets up an ambiguity, where both the “position” and “myself” are made more impossible, a feedback loop of modernist difficulty-making that turns on a doubled sense of the poetic: as a participatory form based in the “we,” and as an abstracted and individual form based on formal innovation. In a foreshadowing of her later critiques, Anarchism shows a (Riding) Jackson grappling directly with the possibility of poetry to “tell” the “truth,” and it ends with an abdication, a paradoxical disavowal of that which might be able to do the job.

Working her way through a number of dialectics—birth and death, expression and communication, the individual and the collective, the real and the unreal (9; 13; 42; 45)—in Anarchism (Riding) Jackson unravels the idealized aesthetics and criticism that dominate her poetic community. She establishes poetry as the only route to the
impossibility she seeks to embody, an unarticulated ideal of its own. For (Riding) Jackson a poem “is the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience—it is a vacuum and therefore nothing” (17). Again, (Riding) Jackson stages a slip between creator and thing created: the poem is a passive “result of an ability,” not something willed or created but still dependent on a certain aptitude for the task. This paradoxical and yet ideal “vacuum,” in Riding’s account, counteracts the corrupt “flattery” she saw in romantic poetics (which wallowed in “overfeeling”) and contemporary criticism (which flouted experience in favour of the intellectual “expert”) (16). (Riding) Jackson puts forward what one might call a reverse Neo-Platonism, asserting that, “[a]s nothing—well as nothing [a poem] is everything in an existence where everything, being effect of effect without cause, is nothing” (18). Because “cause” is sidestepped, “there is nothing for which the poet can flatter himself or receive flattery” (17). Thus poetry fulfills its purpose when it mimes the nothingness of existence, flattening out effects and causes into a self-referential “vacuum” where the poet is mere vessel, on the one hand, and a refined and impossible figuration, on the other. In this contradictory position, says (Riding) Jackson, “The only productive design is designed waste” (18). She continues, “Energy that is aware of the impossibility of positive construction devotes itself to an ordered using-up and waste of itself: to an anticipated unhappiness which, because it has design, foreknowledge, is the nearest approach to happiness” (18). The mocking cynicism of this attitude—this assumption that “unhappiness” is inevitable and it is better to “design” one’s own poetic demise—points up (Riding) Jackson’s more general myopia in relation to poetic language. In fact, (Riding) Jackson ends Anarchism with her “Letter of Abdication,” which assumes the voice of an imperious queen who addresses (and judges) a “you” before abdicating her poetic throne. She asserts, “You do not know what you are. I will tell you, though it will not make the least difference to you, since you do not know what you are” (209-10). It is an epistolary voice on the opposite spectrum from (Riding) Jackson address in her letters to Catherine, one that has given up on didacticism and turned to “designed waste.”
One might suggest that (Riding) Jackson’s notion of “designed waste” is a kind of fatalistic re-jigging of Eliot’s “filament,” that famous “suggestive analogy” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 40) that constructs the poet as the “catalyst” of poetic expression; Eliot describes the process as follows:

When the two gases previously mentioned [oxygen and sulfur dioxide] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulfurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (41)

Where (Riding) Jackson departs from Eliot’s model is in the assessment of what the “newly formed acid”—the poem—can be, and what truths it might impart. And though we can draw a parallel between (Riding) Jackson’s and Eliot’s construction of the poet’s role in the poem—her or his inertness and invisibility—it is Eliot’s suggestion that the proper calling of the poet is “a continual surrender of himself to something which is more valuable” (40) that distinguishes his model of poetics from (Riding) Jackson’s: where for Eliot impersonality makes the poet a conduit of a proper tradition (“No poet [...] has his complete meaning alone” [38]), for (Riding) Jackson the “impossible” self of the poet stages an absolute break with the past as a social construct. For her part, (Riding) Jackson claims in “Jocasta” that Eliot’s “whole inspiration is nostalgic” (76); that he is “a serious moralist, bent on professing rather than attacking” (89); and that he “upholds the man of quiet from dogma” (91), though this leads to a “priggish, self-protective minority attitude” (91).

Anarchism stages the problematics of The Telling’s rejection of the “wisdom professions”—represented by Eliot, among other contemporaries—their subservience

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61 I will turn to Eliot’s seminal essay on modernist impersonality in the Conclusion below, focusing in particular on the contradictions in Eliot’s construction of the poet and what purpose he imagines depersonalization serving.
to a social hierarchy (especially a “nostalgic” sense of tradition) that obscures “true” saying. In a range of genres (essays, letters, prose-poems, parables, dialogues), the text explores poetry as the most effective means of using language honestly, one that might be able to forgo what she saw as the “flattery” of the self in favour of a “designed waste” that the poet imagines or creates a priori, before the poem is composed. In a sense, Anarchism is an experiment that tests the limits of poetic expression for telling truth. But even this pre-ordained wastefulness, set in motion as an “effect” of the de-personalized poet, unsettles received modes of expression and gnaws at the foundations of traditional senses of the truth. Good poetry, she implies, is anarchic, and even good poetry is not enough. Indeed, several decades later, in an interview in 1955, Riding responds to this conundrum, suggesting that “[m]y difficulty—apart from that of the inherent unlendability of poetry to the articulate resolution of anything—was involved in a difficulty centered in the question of the nature of human identity” (qtd. in Hamilton 151). For (Riding) Jackson, even in 1928, poetry cannot resolve this identity, but through oscillation, it can point us toward the source of the “difficulty”: representation, or in (Riding) Jackson’s terms, “appearance.” Near the end of Anarchism, again in her “Letter of Abdication,” Riding invokes the image of a circle and asserts that “[a]ppearance is where the circle meets itself, where you live and do not live, where you are and are not dead. Appearance is everything and nothing” (219).

Foregrounding the paradoxical difficulty of “appearance” allows one to avoid Riding’s accusations:

"You stop half-way round the circle in order to spare yourself the humiliation of missing the true end, which is not perceptible in the ordinary way. Indeed if it is not perceived, it makes no difference, the circle goes round and round upon you” (212).

Built into the circularity of (Riding) Jackson’s language here and elsewhere (the poem as a “vacuum and therefore nothing,” appearance as “everything” and “nothing”) is the call for a new order of perception that moves beyond the selfishness of criticism—the fear of “humiliation”—without shirking individualistic discovery.
For (Riding) Jackson the problem of representation, of “appearance,” never resolves itself; the circle must continue to slowly revolve around the paradox of impossibility, the “not enough” of any codified system, and it ends, finally, in a subject position she calls the “identity of opposites.” The “Letter of Abdication” suggests that the point of poetry is to seek an end, to establish this external identity (the truth-teller), but not to achieve it. Those who presume to achieve it are fair game for her criticisms. And so, (Riding) Jackson’s individualistic and confrontational quest for the “true end” of an endless circle works against the “muddle”—what she calls in the letter the “warm middle” (213) of centralized subjectivity and a presumption of fulfilled truth—and like in *The Telling*, a carefully formalized series of paradoxes becomes her most productive rhetorical mechanism, a mechanism that asserts, ultimately, the impossibility of represented truth in poetry. (Riding) Jackson summarizes this technique (while simultaneously undercutting it) and its productive possibilities for the poet in a characteristic passage:

I will argue further against what I am arguing for. The you which is you is only you, and not only dead but invisible. And you can never be this you unless you see the you which is it and every one hard round the circle to the end, where you can no longer see, and you are alone. And the result, if you do this? You will be so alive that you will be deader than ever; you will have achieved the identity of opposites; you will have brought two counter-processes to rub noses, and the you which you are not, which is you alone, and the you which you are, which is it, every one, not you—and much good may it do you, except to make you deader than ever. (*Anarchism* 213-214)

Through accusative rhetoric that continually turns in on itself, building binaries upon binaries, (Riding) Jackson here celebrates an “identity of opposites” as an impossible and paradoxical ideal fraught with the blindness of death, but an ideal nonetheless. What Riding makes explicit is the productive non-sense of her argument, as a “scolding” to prospective poets that points out the pitfalls of what she calls “flattery.” As in *The Telling*, her dialectical method here is not merely a negative (nor even a negation of a paradox) because she offers a properly doubled poetic method: though it means poetic
death—or at the least a necessary abdication—(Riding) Jackson impels “you” to bring together “two counter-processes to rub noses,” as a route to that ideal impossibility she both celebrates and abhors throughout the text. It is an impossibly singular subject position to occupy, consisting of “you alone”; and the dialectical flipside—the “you which you are, which is it, every one, not you”—is an equally impossible and idealized community from which Riding’s queen is unalterably apart. Further on, (Riding) Jackson scolds “ignoble and indecent” individuals who “begin with contradictions instead of ending with them; efface them instead of developing them” (217). What the “identity of opposites” in her “Letter of Abdication” establishes, then, is the conditions by which (Riding) Jackson—nearly forty years later, in The Telling—can develop and then project a singular-plural identity that reincorporates those others she dismisses at the moment of abdication.

So, through a call for an “identity of opposites” that builds negation upon negation, and through a demonstration of that paradoxical form of argumentation and way of being, Riding lays the groundwork for her later philosophical engagements, offering simultaneously in Anarchism a support and rejection of poetry: it is a “vacuum and therefore nothing,” but it can emulate the nothingness of reality and make the circles of appearance “concentric” in the right circumstances. However, if that truth-telling is achieved in poetry, the poet—“you,” the truth-teller—is “deader than ever.” Truth-telling, in Riding’s schema, is coextensive with the death of the poet, a death that then clears the way for that “storying of us” (Riding) Jackson pursues in her later writing. For (Riding) Jackson in Anarchism Is Not Enough, the only alternative to the unavoidable and counterproductive contradictions of a poetic identity is abdication, a self-removal that acknowledges the inevitability of death and initiates further production in the anarchy of the singular poet’s absence. And if we sound this abdication, wrought via an oscillating “identity of opposites,” with the call in Four Unposted Letters to Catherine for disavowal from time, history, and the social world, we can see the synthetic outcome of
(Riding) Jackson’s dialectical method: a singular-plural writerly identity that forthrightly “tells” but does so by giving up semantic control to an undefined collective; an expansion of the “now” to include both the deep time of human communication and the revolutionary future of subjects connected by a common language. This dialectical method leads finally to a provisional articulation of the extant but unparaphrasable and never fully-expressible truth, a truth that is formal but somehow beyond individual expression, a truth of the “now” that dwells simultaneously in a “contemporaneous” space of timelessness (or, at least, a space that overwhelms the presumptions of human time). The subject who encounters the “muddle,” who attempts to “tell” or to speak truth to power, cannot exist outside of these contradictions, yet (Riding) Jackson’s corpus unequivocally calls for precisely this otherness to all that is, this telling of a truth beyond human understanding. And again, it is not the content of that truth that matters; instead it is the writerly self she creates, and the oscillating language she uses to present that self.

A Fable of a Conclusion: The Identity of Opposites Telling the Muddle

Across her corpus, Laura (Riding) Jackson launches a critique against received systems of knowledge, time, language, and subjectivity. In this vein, there is much more akin in the two phases of her writing life than there is stark difference. In her early criticism, (Riding) Jackson works against the “wisdom professions” of scholarly pursuit, seeks after an “identity of opposites” that might cut through the “muddle” of mainstream discourse, and she posits a poetry of “designed waste” as the tool that might solve, or at least reframe, the problem. In her later work, after her hiatus, poetry is shunted aside in favour of a more holistic vision of language expression, held together by the act and text of telling. In both phases we can see a writerly self that oscillates between being a forthright agent of change and a figure of absolute withdrawal. Through close reading,
through taking (Riding) Jackson’s words at their word, we can begin to see that in this movement between extremes—across this “identity of opposites”—(Riding) Jackson is working to create the possibility for that expanded, multifarious “now” in the space of the text, a now that is, following Benjamin, “shot through with splinters of messianic time.” History is a “discouraging word” for (Riding) Jackson because it places social limits on the boundlessness of human experience, an experience that can only manifest in, can only be “told” in language. And it is this future-facing utopic vision, discernible primarily in the movement and form of her words, that aligns (Riding) Jackson most closely to Benjamin’s allegory of the Angel of History, though as a mirror image: where Benjamin’s figure of historical materialism “must see” the detritus of the past rising up before him, (Riding) Jackson’s angel has turned through “telling” towards a future where the clutter and the “muddle” has been cleared away.

A final example, a final telling that might help us to identify the primary sites of (Riding) Jackson’s dialectical movement can be found in Experts Are Puzzled, a book of criticism and philosophy published in 1920, at the very beginning of (Riding) Jackson’s writing career, in a story entitled “The Fable of the Dice.” Set in “a town doomed to destruction,” the story tells how a woman, who describes herself as “an accurate old woman with a sharp sense of history,” is “burned for a witch” because she dances (on “her pink cloud”) rather than obsessing about the coming disaster (92). “They have burned me because I declared that the doom which shall befall the town in three months could make no difference to me, and indeed it cannot. Nor, indeed, can it make any difference to them. Like Napoleon, they merely pretend this because they have not the lightness to dance or the beauty to laugh or the courage to mount a pink cloud. Hugging the earth with their haunches, they bring doom mistily upon themselves in the trembling dice, to befall them not once but perpetually, as a long rain fills the open mouths of cowards. (92)
This “witch” figure encapsulates one aspect of the “identity of opposites” that (Riding) Jackson calls for throughout her work: outside and above the “pretend[ing]” of her fellow townsfolk, she is both more and less human than they are because she sees and welcomes a future wrought by an inevitable disaster. Her “sharp sense of history” allows her an indifference to the “doom” itself, to a fated external event that she believes has no power over her (or indeed, “them”). This subject position takes solace in the chance operations of the world, in the “trembling dice” that are the harbinger of a “doom [...] to befall them not once but perpetually.” The judgmental “cowards” of the town are repeating and repeating again the downfalls of the superstitious and the uncourageous across history—figures like Napoleon, it seems—and in their silence are leaving the world to the “witches” who “dance” above the fray. After the apocalypse, an event somehow both within and beyond the writer’s control, we arrive at the “world” given “to uninfected discourse,” as (Riding) Jackson’s epigraphs to Epilogue would have it. However, as yet, even this world is simply cleared away for what she calls in The Telling “the storying of us” (32). The story after the “doom” is yet to be told, but it is to be told by precisely this kind of figure, by one that foretells and embraces her own destruction as something other than destruction.

This “fable” is instructive as well because the sorceress’ dancing—a form, perhaps, of “telling”—can be thought of as a methodology. I have worked in this chapter to reframe (Riding) Jackson’s work through Benjamin’s theories of history, but more so his textual strategies: setting up what seems to be a synthesis that is, when pressed, simply another unresolved contradiction. It is a productive contradiction though, one that opens up new space—an openness of form that comes closest to articulating (Riding) Jackson’s “truth.” The “fable” also plays up (Riding) Jackson’s complex and contradictory self-representation, one that dwells between her statements on language and her utterance/telling of it, a complexity drawn from (Riding) Jackson’s construction of audience, of the others who represent and embody received structure but also

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function as a source for utopic refashioning. In (Riding) Jackson’s utopic vision, the world will shift, the revolution will come, for a range of reasons: in part because of the utterances of people currently trapped in that “muddle” of historical inheritances and prejudices; in part because of the critiques of her imperious “queen” (who is “straight”; who embodies the “identity of opposites”; who enacts “designed waste”); and in part because of fate (that toss of the “dice”). In her texts, (Riding) Jackson’s is a politics that also functions as a critique of current systems, constructing a space of writing that works to unravel received structures of truthfulness, authority, power, temporality. What fills the space, ultimately, is something yet to come—in a telling for which, (Riding) Jackson reminds us, “we all wait.”
Conclusion:

A Dielectrical Method: Modernism and/as Oscillation

In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.

–Benjamin, “Konvolut N” *The Arcades Project 456*

The history-writing subject is, properly, the part of humanity whose solidarity embraces all the oppressed. It is the part which can take the greatest theoretical risks because, in practical terms, it has the least to lose.

- Benjamin, Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History” 404

To initiate a conclusion to this project, I want to return to one of the primary dialectics at work in my method throughout—that between subject and object, or more specifically that between the self and history, as mediated by language—and to consider the contribution it makes to the study of modernism. At its core, this project asks: How can a writer who encounters the contradictions of modernity—who is grounded in a contradictory language and a social context she or he cannot avoid, jettison, or resolve—develop a self-representation that takes into account those tensions, that finds a language or a textual strategy that can present the stark realities of a current moment and imagines a space or a time of emancipation within or beyond the here and the now? If we can identify an innovation in my work here, perhaps it dwells in the method: a close reading situated between these four writers and their self-representations that seeks to identify and even intensify the contradictions of their language and form as a way to “brush history against the grain,” as Benjamin phrases it—to register the
ideological investments each writer embraces, disavows, ignores, avoids. This principle of irreducible movement, of oscillation activated through language, distinguishes this project from its forebears. It is a critical lens by which a politics of form can be identified, if provisionally.

In this approach, we can identify at least two potential implications for the study of the literature of modernity. First, the examination of modernist self-writing—whether the “I” of autobiography, the complex self-representations in autofiction, or the writerly “scene” projected in philosophy or criticism—can gather together the contradictions of modernity, reading in these texts the structures of social and ideological relations in allegorical form. For example, we can read Mansfield’s presentation of Kezia’s awe as she views the interior of the doll’s house, or the young Benjamin’s breathless unrolling of socks, as miniaturized versions of the overwhelming difficulty of penetrating the complexity of bourgeois ideology (its identities, its interrelations, its spaces, its customs and expectations, its hidden power relations, its more or less obvious oppressions). This reframed reading practice connects to a second outcome of the present project: a reframing of Benjamin’s philosophy of history as a model for reading literary texts. Benjamin most often self-identified as a literary critic—and indeed his habilitation on German tragic drama and his late work on Brecht, Kafka, Proust, and Baudelaire attest to this focus—but his “theses” on history and his Arcades Project are most often taken up as part of his political critique of practices of history and historiography, or as a (more or less) Marxist theoretical critique of fascism, modernity, and social relations under industrial capitalism. By bringing together Benjamin’s thinking on the historical—and its relation to the subject, to time, and to revolution—with his complex and understudied autobiographies that were written at the same time, we can begin to understand possible applications of his thinking to literary texts of the period. And perhaps, we can gain a flash of revelation about Benjamin’s thought and politics more broadly, the ways his own self-representations position him as both an agent and a
reader of history, in a quintessentially modernist configuration. These reframings turn on the construction and/or identification of an oscillating dialectic in the movement of language, so that our readings seek out and seek to intensify contradiction in the texts we encounter, and our sense of Benjamin’s politics of form (his “churning” of language) gains purchase among those contradictions in a “frozen moment” of text or image. This approach positions this project squarely in the post-Marxist tradition of ideology critique, following after Jameson in particular. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson points out that “the binary opposition is the paradigmatic form of all ideology” (18), and that the goal of an innovative artist—Piet Mondrian in Jameson’s case here—is to “keep that opposition and that tension alive” (35). This approach suggests that the tightening of tensions across contradictory terms (self/history; writer/text; self/other; subject/object; masculine/feminine; and so on)—their oscillation—is more than a simple playfulness or openness engaged by these writers: it is a form of ideology critique, pointing up both the necessity and the impossibility of the very oppositions they activate.

Broadly speaking, then, this project offers strategies for a re-reading of Walter Benjamin’s and of modernism’s politics of form, bringing them together in the space of the writerly text and examining the oscillating movement of the dialectic in their language. Benjamin’s writing of the 1930s continuously demonstrates that it is by understanding the oscillating role of the historical—writ both large (progress and temporality) and small (memory and document)—in the texts we read that we can register their political investments, involvements, currencies, and inurements. For Benjamin, there is no “outside” to our present political moment, no modernist impersonality that one might occupy. And indeed, we may read Stephen Dedalus “paring his fingernails” as simply Joyce’s ironized portrait of himself as a young aesthete who has read too much Thomas Aquinas (*Portrait* 181). But it is in the text, in close reading, that these contradictions of self and history, of past and present, play out—
never reaching resolution or solace in their pursuits. The dialectical turn in these readings—the “content of the form,” to use Jameson’s phrase—comes from the movement of the attempt to de-personalize, to re-jig temporality, to grasp the ineffable “truth” of a scene witnessed. In Pound’s injunction to “make it new,” for example, we can identify the desire (and the resolution) to resolve contradiction; a closer examination of the injunction and its effects reveals that this pursuit leads instead to further contradiction, so that the oscillation of the dialectic becomes the unsteady ground of understanding, self, and indeed language itself. We—and they—are most certainly wandering in a “waste land” of meaninglessness and co-optation to broader forces, but an awareness of and engagement with that space and time can lead to a “flash of revelation” that Benjamin so covets, and it can unveil the ideologies that structure modern experience. Every text is split within itself, riddled with cracks along its edges and down to its very structures. As such, a critic—creating his or her own text—ends up, on the one hand, merely self-deconstructing and, on the other, staging an experience of reading other texts and contexts. The oscillation between these poles is dialectical criticism as I’ve pursued it throughout this project. Rather than posit that “there is nothing outside the text,” as Jacques Derrida claims (158), or to embrace an “incredulity toward metanarratives” as Jean-François Lyotard does (xxiv), I argue that the self-reflexive process of writing—of textualizing a necessarily “split” reality (in this case the reality of reading)—is indeed a movement towards that ostensibly objective outside, even as one acknowledges the final impossibility of the task. The dialectic, in the schema, is always in motion, until petrified into an image to be read, but always to be read provisionally, always to be reimagined when the oscillation inevitably starts back up.

This dissertation began with an examination of the dialectic between two injunctions: Fredric Jameson’s (“Always Historicize!”) and Ezra Pound’s (“Make it New”). As a way to conclude, I want to examine briefly the ways these oscillating contradictions
of subject and object, of self and history, play out in two seminal program statements for the project of Anglo-American modernism, both of which consider the role of the historical in the development of an innovative aesthetic practice: T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and Pound’s “I Gather of the Limbs of Osiris.” I suggest that the dialectical method I have been developing helps to open up these texts, and indeed the modernist canon more broadly, to a political reading of the formal investments of modernist texts. These two essays from relatively early in the career of Eliot and early in the career of Pound appear to establish, or to solidify, the stereotypical image of aesthetic modernism—an austere distance from the material world, a rejection of Romanticism, the privileging of uncompromised artistic freedom, even the hints of a growing conservatism—but a closer reading can reveal a more complex sense of newness, history, artistic identity, and indeed the political. I draw our attention to these two essays in particular because they speak to the potential use-value of the oscillating method pursued in this project, revealing the unresolved double-edge of a radical aesthetics: any innovation requires of the writer both a deep engagement with the past (a focused interpretive act) and a rejection of that past (a refusal to interpret), which puts the writing self claiming that newness in a precarious position. That Pound and Eliot now occupy privileged positions in the modernist canon makes the textual ambiguities of their early invocations of newness and radicalism of particular interest. As it pertains to this project, too, one cannot ignore the gendered nature of these two essays (and figures), a kind of “privileged” counterpoint to the three more marginal female modernists I examine in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Indeed, the preliminary readings below suggest that, across the spectrum of the literature of modernity, the problem of self and history—and a Benjaminian reading of that oscillation—presented itself as a tension worth addressing and exploring (but not resolving), regardless of one’s gender or position in the pantheon of the literary canon.
First published in 1919, and widely anthologized and re-published thereafter, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” outlines not only Eliot’s views on tradition and history, but also on impersonality as a cardinal virtue of good art. Its influence on our understanding of the canon of modernist writing is unmistakable. I want to focus, first, on Eliot’s simultaneous naturalization and personalization of the critical act in the opening paragraphs of the essay: “criticism,” he avers, “is as inevitable as breathing”—and “we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in [the French’s] work of criticism” (37). What begins and ends as a comment on national predilection—a response to the claim that the French are “more critical” than his British brethren—more importantly identifies the “inevitable” critical act as a wholly natural activity, open to anyone who reads a book and has a response to that experience. This inclusive and even populist claim conflicts directly with the public persona Eliot—consciously or unconsciously—fashioned for himself in his later career, as an elite don of high art whose celebrity, as David Chinitz has claimed, was “based on a perception that he was above the rabble who watched television and read bad novels” (184); moreover, this conception of the critical act also contrasts with the Eliot fashioned by critics who, according to Andreas Huyssen, tend to project him as a figure whose “mission” was “to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, massification, technological modernization, in short of modern mass culture” (163). On this reading, Eliot’s invocation of “tradition,” of “the historical sense” (38), can be read as an attempt to buttress culture against the encroaching anarchy of the masses. In this case, though, to whom does that “inevitability” of the critical act apply—the critic or the poet, the reader or the artist? Further unresolved ambiguities play out in the text, for example the way criticism for Eliot seems to be primary, as a natural emotional response to an experience (like “breathing”), and poetry appears to be secondary, as an articulation of that response (the “filament” analogy below). Though beyond my immediate scope here, a number of contradictions can be identified in the critical reception of Eliot’s
essay, as well: the fact that Eliot speaks predominantly as an Englishman and for English culture (a next generation Matthew Arnold, perhaps), in spite of his roots in midwest America; what Matthew Hart calls the “amazing fact” that the masses were in fact central to Eliot’s cultural project, as an audience for a “moribund” art (178); the way this early essay marks both a noteworthy consistency and a marked departure from his later criticism, as Cianci and Harding note (2-4). Indeed, there are divisions visible within the text, tensions reproduced and reinforced by later readers of the essay, and by interpreters of modernism more broadly.

For my purpose here, what these tensions indicate is that Eliot’s meditation on tradition—how it mediates a poet’s relation to his own present and how critics are to position a poem in literary history—oscillates between a critical engagement with poetry as such and a statement of his own poetics, or put another way, between objective and subjective understandings of how poetry works. As it moves between camps, the essay tends to position Eliot as the arbiter of the “good”—especially when it is his own poetry which fits the bill—amounting, rather like (Riding) Jackson’s criticism examined in Chapter 4, to a form of self-representation or even self-promotion. But the point here is not to undermine the legacy of T.S. Eliot, canonical modernist, but to examine the movement between the critic and the poet in the essay. Brett Neilson suggests that “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is “the prose counterpoint to The Waste Land, self-consciously testing the boundaries between unintelligibility and lucidity, nonsense and knowledge, and literature and criticism” (203). The latter dialectic interests me because its oscillation in the text, Eliot’s self-positioning on the borders of poet and critic, hints at a deeper imbrication with another irresolvable dialectic—that between natural sciences and art. The result of what Eliot describes as the poet’s “continual surrender of himself as he is”—in favour of a complex and refined “consciousness of the past”—moves in the direction of a poetic objectivity: “It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science” (40). In a
sense, Eliot is constructing a model of the poet as a conduit through which a properly-conceived tradition may be recognized, but it is an “objective” status only post facto—after the poet has acquired this complex sense of the past. As I suggest below, it is the critic, Eliot himself in the essay, who takes on the position of articulating this representation in the poetry, in a contradiction that is never resolved in the essay.

These oscillations are mobilized in the language of objectivity, in a push—which we will see in Pound below—for scientific analogues for unmistakably subjective artistic processes. I would argue that there are ways in which the identity of critic is split from within by the possibility that criticism is in fact parasitic upon the work of artists, or that the act of explanation in fact destroys a work of art that can and does speak for itself. Eliot implicitly acknowledges the potential self-destructiveness of a poet constructing a critical approach: one might delegitimize one’s own poetic output. Eliot’s response to this predicament is effectively to de-subjectify the poet and, again by implication, to position an “objective” and historically-conscious critic in his place:

What happens [as the poet “develop[s]” a “consciousness of the past”] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. (40)

The outcome of this process is an objectification of the poet by the critic, so that all present “moment[s]” and quirks of “personality” are extinguished within the art object—or in the poet. And this is done for a higher purpose, for that which “is more valuable.” Eliot is not exceedingly clear what, precisely, this greater good might be—though we can say that it is a present inflected by a holistic sense of history (“of the pastness of the past” and “of its presence”[38]), and a poetic identity on the far side of the “personal” and of the “expression of personality” (43). The austerity of Eliot’s position here brings to mind Benjamin’s comment—examined in greater depth in Chapter 3—on the dominant classes and their relation to history:
The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.

There are a number of threads to bring together here. First, if we accept that Eliot consciously positioned himself as the arbiter of British taste, I suggest that he is mobilizing a certain conception of history in the service of a reproduction of social hierarchies. He decidedly is not refiguring “value” in his call for “continual self-sacrifice” but rather “giv[ing] the commands” in “an arena” already well-established. Eliot’s “tiger’s leap into the past”—his sense that “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [a man’s] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (38)—then, is on a first read clearly in the realm of fashion, in Benjamin’s configuration: using history as a justification for a present position of power. Indeed, Eliot’s Western canon casts a powerful shadow over “the historical sense” which leads the poet, gladiator-like, to a necessary extinction, while the power structure, and Eliot’s position as the critic within it, remain intact.

But what we are left with are competing senses of how the past may be used—and I claim that there is revolutionary potential in Eliot’s seemingly “tradition[al]” critical stance. Indeed, by levelling this criticism at Eliot’s privilege in this way, I am opening up the possibility—implicit in Benjamin’s analogy above, since Marxist revolution “leap[s] into the past” (that “open air of history”) just as the French revolution did, but without
obscuring the historical source\textsuperscript{62}—that the reproduction of power structures through historical determinism can be turned dialectically towards a reconceptualization of present conditions. As I suggest above, we can see this refiguring at work when Eliot, like (Riding) Jackson in the “Preface” to The Telling, sets the relative power he wields as a cultural producer against the discursive power of science. Eliot asserts, “It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science”; what follows in the essay is Eliot’s famous “suggestive analogy” (40):

\begin{quote}
[...] that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned [oxygen and sulfur dioxide] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulfurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (41)
\end{quote}

Eliot invokes a chemical reaction as an analogue to poetic creation, illustrating his argument that “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (42). There is a doubled but intricately related sense of objectivity at play in the trajectory of this argument. The first sense is the presumed objectivity of scientific experiment, the inherent and verifiable truth one can ascribe to a chemical reaction without human agents (beyond those that design the experiments and record their observations). Of course, the truth of empiricism was

\textsuperscript{62} It worth recalling here Marx’s comments in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (explored in more depth in Chapter 3) that “[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”; conversely, Marx argues, a purging of that past—like the pernicious obscuring of the past wrought by French revolutionaries turned state functionaries—is analogous to a “beginner” learning to “freely express” himself in a new language “forgets his native tongue in the use of the new” (15-16).
under great scrutiny at the time of Eliot’s essay. The second sense of objectivity involves the poet, that “inert, neutral, and unchanged” catalyst for and/or medium of the poem. The repeated “not” in Eliot’s description, a decrying of “personality” as a mark of an immature poet guilty of “errors” (764), reveals, I claim, an anxiety or an admission of guilt: the ever-present possibility that Eliot himself is guilty of this sort of “personal” poetry. The “neutral[ity]” of the “shred of platinum” can be called into question here— from both directions, since one can argue that science has truck with the elite and monied classes in developed nations and profits by its sole claim on truth, and that political disaffiliation can be read as a political move in itself. My inclination is to read this tension-riven sense of objectivity in two speculative directions: 1) as an indication of Eliot’s burgeoning conservatism and self-satisfaction, as flag-bearing objective critic and poet par excellence; 2) as a performance of the impossibility of true objectivity, and thereby a critique of the doctrine of truth in scientific discourse and of a truly objective poetics. Set side-by-side, perhaps we can see the partial truth in both readings, the movement between objective, timeless truth-telling and subjective, constructivist historical consciousness. In this oscillation of self-fashioning, I see the possibility for productive paradox, for an understanding of Eliot here as a dialectician of self who affirms his own elitism while simultaneously (and unwittingly) unravelling it. If in Eliot’s conception the individual talent is set both beside and beyond received tradition—and the artistic personality is somehow “neutral” in this exchange—the poet’s self-representing text leaves a productive space between objectivity and subjectivity that serves to intensify contradictions and to counteract the reinscription of the triumphalist narratives of that tradition.

Michael Bell suggests that Karl Pearson’s The Grammar of Science [1892] and Arthur Eddington’s The Nature of the Physical World [1928]—both intended for “lay readers”—“bracket the period” and demonstrate that in spite of great effort on the part of scientists, “the underlying notion of observation [become] increasingly problematic” (11). Eddington’s book in particular points up the way the moderns “live[d] in the Newtonian world of the layman while knowing its limited, almost illusory character” (Bell 12).
So, however inconclusive Eliot’s poetics of depersonalization might be, it is clear that science can offer critics a pantheon of imagery by which to illustrate abstract theoretical positions, and because of its epistemological foundations, it nearly always invokes (and calls into question) objectivity in this enactment. In these analogies, “objective” science and “subjective” arts are coextensive, imbricated, oscillating rather than inextricably opposed. Science and arts are a stand-in for the oscillation of self and history we have seen playing out in the texts of Benjamin, Mansfield, Stein, and (Riding) Jackson. For his own part, Benjamin claims in the “Paralipomena” to his “theses” on history that “The dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning that runs across the whole horizon of the past” (403). If the dialectical image is, as I have claimed, a construction initiated by the writer—if only as an originary “mover” that sets elements in a juxtaposition—Benjamin, like Eliot above, is implying a liquidation of the subject from the process. The lightning is “an occurrence” without an agent, just as ball lightning, specifically, is generally considered to be an unverifiable phenomenon with too many possible causes and effects to be fully recognized by the scientific community at large (Stenhoff 166–7). So it serves my reading here as both an apt metaphor for the work of the critic—revealing dialectical images that “shock” our conception of the present via flashes of the past—and an acknowledgement of the potential impossibility of the task as an objective process of truth-telling, scientific or otherwise. The backdrop for this tension of subjective knowledge and its dissemination is what Benjamin calls the “whole horizon of the past,” and it points up another dialectic at work—the historical and the timeless, which can be lined up next to the dialectic of the subjective and objective. Platinum is and always has been an “inert” catalyst of the chemical reaction Eliot describes; where his analogy breaks down—and the same is true of Benjamin’s ball lightning metaphor—is in the human element, in the agents of historical development and understanding. This developments is, of course, not always progressive, and in fact triumphalist narratives of progress are among the most obvious of Benjamin’s targets throughout his late criticism. But one cannot deny that a large part of the arc of human
history is determined, shifted, undermined, and problematized by the presence of subjects. One cannot escape from this inevitability, neither through constructing a self as a filament of platinum, nor through seeing the study of history as the flash of dialectical elements. What both Benjamin and Eliot do, in response or by chance, is stage this contradiction in their writing—especially through metaphor—and thereby undo (or “churn,” to use another of Benjamin’s images) the “objective” ground on which aesthetic and social authority rests. Indeed, a dialectical reading, like the ones I have pursued in this dissertation, shows the ways that objective and subjective knowledge are mutually dependent; they oscillate, both in their acquisition and in their explanation. By examining the status each affords the critic, however, we can begin to see where the imbalances in the relation between objectivity and subjectivity translate to an enactment and/or a maintenance of extant ideological structures or of defined avenues of political power.64

This irresolvable tension between the subjective and the objective—mediated by the language and imagery of science—plays out in the critical writing of Ezra Pound as well, and it is here that I would like to pursue a conclusion to the present study. There are relevant crossovers between Benjamin’s approach to historical interpretation and Pound’s expansive critical oeuvre, which can best be demonstrated by a short foray into “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”—a 1911 essay wherein Pound lays the foundation for the aesthetic principles of Imagism: clarity, condensation, musicality, and so on. Historical study (indeed, “tradition”) offers an entry point for articulating these principles. After describing the transition in Europe from a feudal to a mercantile economy, Pound asserts,

64 In his recent book, Modernism, Levenson argues that, nearly a hundred years later, and in spite of a wide number of re-framings and re-readings, “the monuments of high Modernism—often epitomized by Ulysses and The Waste Land—are still accused of aesthetic autonomy and social disengagement” (247-8). Levenson’s observation attests to the longevity of the influence of a certain reading of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as a foundation for a hierarchized and canonical understanding of Modernism.
In the history of the development of civilisation or of literature, we come upon such interpreting detail. A few dozen facts of this nature give us intelligence of a period—a kind of intelligence not to be gathered from a great array of facts of the other sort. These facts are hard to find. They are swift and easy of transmission. They govern knowledge as the switchboard governs an electric circuit. (“Osiris” 22-23).

Pound calls these sorts of “swift” facts “luminous details” that deliver, to use Benjamin’s imagery, a clear and crystalline sense of the past (23). And Pound, like Benjamin, is careful to articulate his historiographic sense as a “method,” in this case a “method most vigorously hostile to the prevailing mode of today” (21): “The artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment” (23). Pound’s description of his method recalls Benjamin’s avowal in The Arcades Project that he “needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations” (460). Where the aesthetic methods of Benjamin and Pound come together, then, is in an oscillating critical orientation to the past: an attitude of respect for and knowledge of past practice—mediated by a clear sense that the complications of modernity call for something else—and an understanding that the past, accessed but not interpreted, would provide the material for that shift.

Where Benjamin and Pound differ most significantly, however, is in the process of selection. Whereas Benjamin digs for the most obscure, marginalized, and rejected details, Pound tends towards the canon, towards that which is well-established and authoritative. At the end of his essay, Pound asks,

As for the scholastic bearing, which matters much less than the artistic, if one wished an intimate acquaintance with the politics of England or Germany at certain periods, would one be wiser to read a book of generalities and then read at random through the archives, or to read through, let us say, first the State papers of Bismarck or Gladstone? Having become really conversant with the activities of either of these men, would not almost any document of the period fall, if we read it into some sort of orderly arrangement? Would we not grasp its relation to the main stream of events? (“Osiris” 42-43)
We are back, in a way, to what Benjamin calls above “the arena” of the “ruling classes”—so that it seems difficult to see Pound in this passage as anything other than a triumphalist historian proposing a top-down filtration of history as a better choice than the understanding acquired when one “read[s] at random through the archive.” Indeed, I am tempted to suggest that paging through archives haphazardly is far more productive, at least because it offers the possibility of the new and the strange. However, an oft-cited passage from Benjamin—one that serves as the epigraph for my Introduction—presents the possibility of a more dialectical reading of Pound’s position as a cultural producer:

The historical materialist can take only a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished. This inventory is called culture. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which the historical materialist cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not also a document of barbarism. The historical materialist keeps his distance from all of this. He has to brush history against the grain—even if he needs a barge pole to do it. (Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History” 406-7).

The productive vagueness or openness of Pound’s “luminous details” matches up closely with Benjamin’s call to “brush history against the grain.” Thus, when Pound seeks the “intelligence of a period,” or when he angles to “grasp” a document’s “relation to the main stream of events,” he is simultaneously re-doing and undoing the received narratives of western culture. It is, to use Benjamin’s nomenclature, barbarous to claim that the papers of a tyrant like Bismarck will give a holistic picture of 19th century German life, but this is indeed only what Pound calls the “scholastic bearing”—a position akin, perhaps, to (Riding) Jackson’s denigration of what she calls the “wisdom professions”—and not all of what he is saying. The “artistic” bearing is an order of magnitude more important to Pound, and in fact the “luminous details,” the swift facts that “govern knowledge,” are those produced by and identified in works of art. Art—
aligned, I suggest, with the work of Benjamin’s historical materialist—is for Pound the place not only where culture is produced but also where one is able to “keep his distance” from “the spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished.” The tension in Pound’s work lies in the ostensible distance he creates for himself as a critic, while he is at the same time drawn to and inspired by the victories perpetrated by “great men” of history. It is a tension that grew ever tighter as Pound worked through his Cantos in between anti-semitic and fascistic radio addresses in the 1930s.

I want to end this conclusion dialectically, with an expansion on Pound’s metaphor of the “switchboard which governs an electric circuit.” I had a fortuitous conversation with a Master’s student in computer science a few years ago where I was attempting to explain, in layman’s terms, what my critical methodology was—a conversation that inevitably led to an elaboration on the notion of the dialectic. As this was a graduate student social, in a pub, my colleague misheard me, and proceeded to respond with his understanding of the dielectric, a term used by physicists to describe a material that provides resistance between the two poles of an electric circuit. When it enters an electric field, rather than conduct the energy, the dielectric material itself polarizes relative to what is called its electric susceptibility. It seems to me that this case of miscommunication (dielectric vs. dialectic) reveals something not only about metaphors based in science but also the role and effect of dialectical criticism on the critic him- or herself. The “luminous details” Pound celebrates are the switchboard in an array of knowledge “circuits,” and we would find the dielectric in the connections between the circuits. Thus, an expansion of Pound’s metaphor would posit those swift facts as a governing or structuring mechanism, and a dialectical splitting of those elements (and, after Benjamin, a re-purposing of those elements in juxtaposition with other “facts”) would in fact work at and indeed undermine the very circuits that give structure to that switchboard. But the relative susceptibility of the critic, I would suggest, is an important factor in the process—because entering the “electric field”
Pound sets up will inevitably alter the dielectric material (the critic), leading perhaps to a polarization. That final logical step is indeed oscillation at its most technical, because at the atomic level, polarized material appears solid yet moves endlessly from positive to negative and back again. We can think, perhaps, of Eliot’s “filament” here too: the poet is the “catalyst” who is necessary to the chemical reaction (which is also a movement of electrons) but does not show up as part of the final product. As a literal enactment of the dialectical critical act, and as a scientific metaphor for the role of the critic (who is unassailably altered, or even removed, by the act of criticism itself), the dielectric is an apt endpoint, which is also unavoidably a commencement.

This productive sense of ambiguity, of a writerly self dwelling between and among opposed terms or concepts, brings me back to the title of this concluding section—modernism and/as oscillation—in particular the status of the “and/as” conjunction. Like Stein’s time in/of the composition and Benjamin’s erfasst, I seek here to set in motion a tension-riddled ambiguity: In my use of “and/as,” I am proposing that the oscillating dialectic, as a critical method, is both an adjunct to the study of modernism (the “and”) and that it is a necessary analogue to the study of modernism itself (the “as”). Via the “slash,” I posit an oscillation between a fixed binaristic relation between modernism and the criticism of modernism and a metaphorical relation between the two. Put another way, oscillation both defines modernism and acts to deconstruct it; likewise, attempts to define or deconstruct modernism set oscillating ambiguities back in motion—as the cinematic reel of dialectical images moves forward. Like Benjamin, who on the broad view qualifies as a literary modernist himself, writers in this period consistently mediated between the subjective (art) and the objective (criticism), positing themselves as both subjective interpreters and objective conduits of the political and aesthetic tensions of their milieu. They were dialectical and indeed dielectrical in their writing, and this doubled movement reveals, at moments of opposition and tension, the fraught nature of the project of modernity—an era
obsessed with the future, but with its eyes turned to the past. As they entered that “field,” modernists were and continue to be, altered and split. Throughout this project, I have been arguing that this dialectical sense of play between past, present and future can be identified in the work of modernists as a textualization of the complex experience of subjectivity in modernity, the “experience of time” as containing both the Then and the Now, not as an abstract pursuit of innovation but as a thoroughly political intellectual project. Through Benjamin, we can begin to see that the seeming disconnect between high modernist works and the politics of the modernist selves that produced them—the discernible gaps between productively ambiguous texts and increasingly conservative writers—in fact points up the subtle allegorical relations between the struggles of identity and subjectivity and the construction of historical progress. “The traditional focus on Modernists as fascists,” Sara Blair reminds us, “has obscured the much broader range of commitments to which modernists projects, polemics, and concerns were being harnessed” (163). As such, and thanks to an injection of Benjamin’s complex strategies for reading, I contend that the revolution central to modernism is not simply a rejection of and departure from received tradition, but an anti-teleological re-conceiving of history itself through complex textual innovations. Through self-writing, in particular, through the oscillating projection of selves as Angels of History, both the modern subject and the historical itself are “made new.”
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